

**TREK
ENCORE
TWO**

trek encore 2

STORIES & POETRY

BY

GINNA LACROIX



Published at: 235 Pine Ave, #Q, Carlsbad CA 92008

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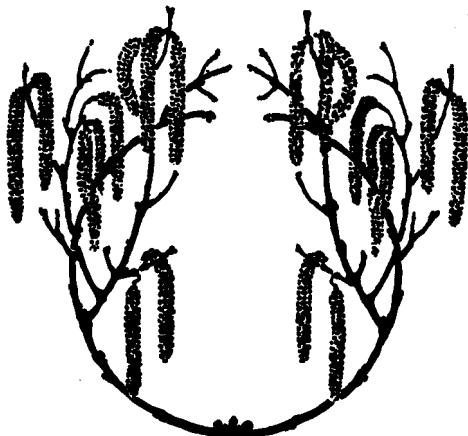
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Editor's Log

1975 was the year I discovered that I was not alone in my appreciation of an old science fiction series called STAR TREK. With the publication of STAR TREK LIVES and the NEW VOYAGES anthologies that year, I was incurably infected and knew I just had to find more of this nifty fan fiction. Easier said than done — my first queries were met with, "Sorry, that zine's out of print." It took more than a year of searching and scrounging before I finally hooked into the publishing network (remember, those were the days before DATAZINE and UNIVERSAL TRANSLATOR — all I had to work with was a very out-of-date STAR TREK WELCOMMITTEE DIRECTORY). I soon began to notice several authors who stood out head and shoulders above the rest — and Ginna LaCroix was one of them; her name on a story assured a most pleasurable read. And thanks to long-time collectors such as Sandra Gent and Ruth Breisinger, who allowed me to borrow their zines by the double armload, I was able to soak up many of Ginna's out-of-print stories. All along I thought it a shame that such a rich ouvre was not available to all fans — and thus was born the concept of TREK ENCORE (originally simply ENCORE, but a Mel Gibson anthology beat us to that title).

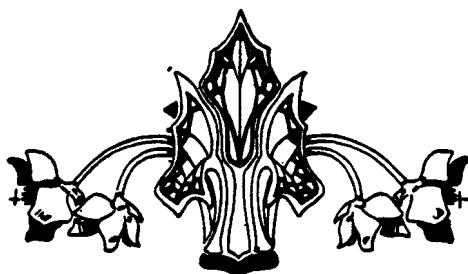
Little did we at IN CASE OF EMERGENCY PRESS realize what a task we had undertaken! Pat Friedman has served yeoman duty at her computer, feeding it each and every page of these three volumes — she had no inkling of the work ahead when she innocently volunteered to "do some typing" for us. And Marie Wallick has been invaluable by giving us access to her mint condition collection of vintage zines — and thanks are owed to all the other San Diego readers who dove into closets and attics searching their collections for us. Usually proofreading is a real chore, but in this case it was a genuine pleasure to read and reread these stories. Thanks also to Kim Knapp and Julie Cabler for their share of time in proofing — which was gauged not by the number of pages, but by the inches of thickness ("I'll have the last 3" back to you tomorrow").

We must also express our gratitude to the editors who have granted permission for reprinting many of the stories and poetry in this collection. Further ahead is a list of those editors who are still actively publishing, including their zines which are still in progress.

If fan reception to the concept of TREK ENCORE is encouraging, we hope to amass other retrospectives of fan writers. We welcome recommendations from our readership of writers they would like to see reprised in this manner.

Happy reading,

Vel Jaeger
EDITOR





From the Author

A word from the author? Yipes, I've never written a word unless I've been hiding behind Kirk and Spock!

Like everyone who writes, there are a few people who must take most of the credit. First — Carol Frisbie, for taking the time to patiently explain to a first time writer why, in "Invasion"¹ she couldn't destroy every starship in the Fleet — and for always pushing for better stories. Second, — Merle Decker. You all know her artwork, and so much of it has made my stories better than they are. Who can forget her illo in "Reckoning" of a dying Kirk held in Spock's arms. A non-Trek friend said of it that she had never seen such love expressed in a drawing, and I agree. Merle's name should also be on "Truths" — a story we hashed out on a midnight drive back from New York and who gave its first editing comment — "It's got a beginning and an ending, but you forgot the middle!" Third — Ruth Breislinger — for being there. Lastly to all the nutty editors who take on the agony of producing the zines in which our works are printed. Without you, we wouldn't be — and think of how much money we would have saved!!

Vel suggested a small history of some of the stories. I seem to write differently from most people, having no preconceived idea before starting of what I'm going to write about. The only concrete idea is a "hurt" (mostly for Kirk — he is so beautiful when he is dirty, bloody, and exhausted — my Spock tends to sit there stoically and say, "There is no pain . . .") or a "quote." That's why I can't get past the short story format. I don't know what's going to happen either. I get so involved as I scribble along that I can't stand it any more and finish so I can find out what happens! I'm afraid I'm never going to write the great American novel. For example, "Safe Haven" was supposed to be a happy shore leave story, but when I discovered men plotting against poor Kirk on page one, I knew I had failed.

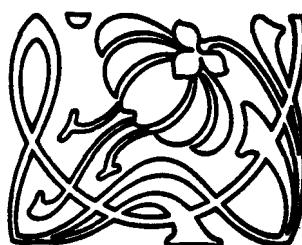
"The Human Tear"² arrived out of a humn book found at the National Cathedral. "Breaking Point"² was originally a very long farce, written when Carol Frisbie complained no one was writing hurt/comfort any more. At that time its title was "I Don't Feel Very Good" or "I Assure You, Doctor, I Am Perfectly All Right" or "Why Won't Anyone Ever Listen To Me." In it everybody got hurt. The story also received the best editing comment I've ever had: "It has to be shortened by about twelve pages, but don't take anything out!" "The Christmas Tree"² was written during Hurricane David, which won me the "Landru Award for Illogic" at the Volkers' New Year's Eve party.

I often write to relieve my frustrations. After blowing a piston rod through the engine of my car one Christmas, did I get mad? No, I sat down and made Kirk a drug addict in "Images."³ "The Outsider"² turned up when everybody else went off to a convention and I had to stay home and work.

Everyone has their favorite story and their own reasons for it, just as I'm sure most writers secretly dislike much of what they have done. I'm no different. I have a very special place in my heart for "Breach"¹ a story written years ago with probably more emotion than anything else I've done. Even now, it stands the test of time and I still love it. I hope each of you finds something of equal value in the following pages, and enjoy reading it as much as I have writing it....

5 5 5

1= TREK ENCORE ONE 2= TREK ENCORE TWO 3= TREK ENCORE THREE



STORIES & POETRY BY GINNA LACROIX

\$ = still in print, or periodically reprinted
 T = yet to be published
 E = unpublished
 All others currently out of print
 INVASION .. Rigel 3
 FABRIC OF SPACE .. Rigel 3
 "Musings" — Rigel 3
 BECAUSE OF YOU — Millenium 1
 ONLY HUMAN — Berengaria 9
 \$ ONE GOOD TURN — Galactic Discourse 2
 SAFE HAVEN — Guardian 2
 THE HUMAN TEAR — Stardate Unknown 5
 WE DO OUR BEST — Fantasia 2
 MISSION ACCOMPLISHED — Log Entries 11
 BUT UP TO NOW — Contact 5
 WHEN SOMEONE UNDERSTANDS — Nexus 1
 BREACH — Turbolift Review 1
 THE OUTSIDER — Contact 8
 TRPTYCH — Rigel 4
 ALL THINGS HEAL IN TIME — Turbolift Review 2
 "One" — Mainely Trek 1
 "Epilogue" — Mainely Trek 1
 A PRIVATE LITTLE HELL — Rigel 4
 RUNNING UP AND DOWN ON GREEN GRASS — Nexus 3
 LIEBESTOD — Thrust
 \$ DEJA VU — Final Frontier 1
 \$ THE BEGINNING — Nome 1
 \$ RECKONING — Galactic Discourse 3
 "Because of You, I Am" — Vault of Tomorrow 1
 "Gem" — Star Canticle 3
 DREAMERS NEVER LIE — Nexus 5
 \$ DISCOVERY — Nome 2
 BREAKING POINT — Sun and Shadow
 THE MOURNER — Sun and Shadow
 EYE OF THE BEHOLDER — Trek Continuum 1
 THE ANSWER — Mainely Trek 2
 "No Longer Brothers" — The Shatner File
 E THE PRICE
 \$ CONUNDRUM — Galactic Discourse 4
 "The Flight" — EnterComm 3
 RETURNING HOME — Millenium 4
 THE PARTING — Nome 4
 T PRELUDE — Mainely Trek 4
 E NEGATIVE PON FARR
 THE PREY — Gateway 1
 IMAGES — Contact 7
 TRUTHS — EnterComm 5

(Approximately in order written)
 THE DREAM — Alpha Continuum 3
 THE SUN IS NO FRIEND OF THE DEAD — Nome 5
 NOTHING LASTS FOREVER — Vault of Tomorrow 6
 REALITY — Kirk
 WE WERE ALL THE SAME AGE ... ONCE — Kirk
 "Legends — and Men" — Kirk
 \$ PRICE OF ACCEPTANCE — Gateway 2
 T ON THE WAY TO THE SKY — Before the Glory
 "As I Stand Here" — Vault of Tomorrow 4
 \$ A TIME TO CARE — Galactic Discourse 4
 WHEN THERE ARE NO ANSWERS — Nome 6
 THE HOTTEST FIRE — Vault of Tomorrow 4
 \$ "Remember" — Galactic Discourse 4
 \$ Perfection" — TREKISM at Length 3
 \$ REVERSE IMAGE — TREKISM at Length 3
 \$ CATHARSIS — Matter/Antimatter 3/4
 INSANE — CERTIFIABLE — Hooker 1
 "Only One Like Him" — Hooker 1
 "Alone" — Hooker 1
 E TENDERFEET
 \$ COLORS — Matter/Antimatter 3/4
 A COMMON BOND — Nome 7
 T A DIFFERENT REALITY — Kaleidoscope
 T "The Two" — Kaleidoscope
 T "The Reason" — Kaleidoscope
 \$ CHINATOWN 1965 — Hooker 2
 \$ TWO DIMENSIONAL THINKING 1
 T THE TURNING POINT — Contact 9
 T "The Reasons" — Contact 9
 \$ A STRANGER MET — Vault of Tomorrow 8
 \$ "View of a Silver Lady" — Vault of Tomorrow 8
 THE WARNING — Mind Meld 1
 \$ THE FIRST PAYMENT — Mind Meld 2
 T WHAT IS LEFT — The Needs of the One
 (or Galactic Discourse 5)
 T "A Vulcan Lament" — "
 T "The Empty Chair" — "
 T "His Name Is ..." — Guardian 7
 \$ BEYOND TRUST — Progressions
 T REVENGE — Mind Meld 3
 "Two Late" — Klee-ct/Alpha
 "Reflections" — Klee-ct/Alpha



Pluggola Page

BEFORE THE GLORY: still in progress; write to Syn Ferguson, 2209-A Monroe, Eugene OR 97405

THE COMPLETE RACK, by J. Emily Vance, reprint; \$10.75 ppd to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

CONTACT COLLECTED: VOLUME 1 - selections from CONTACT 1 & 2, \$11.80 ppd; VOLUME 2 - selections from CONTACT 3 & 4, \$16.05 ppd; CONTACT 9 - in progress, due late 1985; write to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

FINAL FRONTIER 1 & 2, Cynthia Drake; periodically reprinted; write to TIBERIUS PRESS, c/o Sandra Gent, 6472 Cascade St, San Diego CA 92122 AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED

GALACTIC DISCOURSE 1,2,3 periodically reprinted; GALACTIC DISCOURSE 4 still in print: \$14.75 FC, \$13.36 BK SP HD; GALACTIC DISCOURSE 5 & THE NEEDS OF THE ONE in progress; write to SATORI PRESS, Laurie Huff, 709A E. Bullock, Eureka IL 61530

GATEWAY 1 - periodically reprinted; GATEWAY 2 now in print - \$14.00 BK SP HD; write to KALOMI PRESS, c/o Martha Bonds, 5905 Yorkwood Rd, Baltimore MD 21239

GUARDIAN 9 - in progress; write to MAZELTOUGH PRESS, PO Box 248, Wayzata MN 55391

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INTERSTAT - monthly letterzine, current Trek news; \$7/six issues: payable to INTERSTAT, c/o Teri Meyer, 13924 Jefferson Cir, Omaha NE 68137

KALEIDOSCOPE - features the roles of William Shatner; Vel Jaeger & Beth Carlson, eds; still in progress; file SASEs at WSF, PO Box 1366, Hollywood CA 90078

LEGEND'S END, a novel by Martha Bonds; \$13. BK SP HD; write to KALOMI PRESS, c/o Martha Bonds, 5905 Yorkwood Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

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TREKISM AT LENGTH, edited by Vel Jaeger - #1 - \$5.00 FC, #2 - \$8.00 FC, #3 - \$16.75 FC, #4 - \$11.80 FC; #5 - in progress, due Fall/Winter '85; payable to TREKISM, c/o Kim Knapp, 235 Pine Ave, #Q, Carlsbad CA 92008

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VAULT OF TOMORROW 8 - \$12 BK INS; write to: Marion McChesney, 3429 Cheston Ave, Baltimore MD 21211

A Matter of Trust

He watched the wheelchair in horrified silence as it came ever closer to the bed, the bed that held the gnarled, aged body, all that was left of the once proud frame of a starship captain. He could not see who it was that pushed it, all that was real was the chair, and the imprisonment it demanded by its existence.

Just as it reached where he lay helpless, one last surge of strength flowed through the frail body.

"No! Leave me alone - I don't want to be seen..."

The body, twisted by arthritis, could not balance the strength of the push and fell helpless, to lie shattered on the hard floor...



James Kirk woke with a start as he hit the floor. He lay still for a few seconds until the pain in his right elbow and hip subsided. Slowly he realized that he had been dreaming. He wasn't old and helpless - there was no wheelchair. He slowly picked himself up and sat down heavily on the side of the bed, gingerly rubbing his elbow. The mirror on the opposite wall showed a rather disheveled and haggard-looking thirty-four year old man, a man just reaching the prime of his life, not an ancient invalid waiting and wishing for death.

He drew a deep breath as he tried to bring his jumbled thoughts together - the shock of his dream and the solid comfort of reality. He ran his hands through his hair, then held them out in front of him - lean, strong hands, not not the gnarled twisted wrecks of his dream. He shuddered a little at the memory - not only of the recent dream but of hands that had once looked like that - his hands, his body, so old and frail, decaying before his eyes.

He stood up abruptly. He had to forget about it. The planet was far behind them, the comet which had caused the terrible aging already far out in space. Tomorrow they would arrive at Starbase 18 and deliver Commodore Stocker.

He smiled grimly as he walked toward the bathroom. Stocker had avoided him the past couple of days, obviously too embarrassed by what he had done and for the trouble he had managed to get the Enterprise into to face him. Even if he did feel that Stocker had acted the fool, it was true that he had followed regulations as best he knew how in a situation that was totally unfamiliar to him.

But Spock hadn't. Kirk turned the sonics on high and stood under their stinging rays as he thought about the actions of his First Officer. Spock had followed Starfleet regulations to the letter and in front of Kirk's officers, not just those affected by the disease, and had stripped him of his command. There was no show of emotion, no apology for his action, just cold blooded, calculated exposure of every weakness the aging process had laid open. Spock had assumed full responsibility - it was his action which started the events which had almost destroyed the Enterprise.

Kirk slammed the sonics off, flinching as his bruised elbow hit the shower wall. He grabbed a towel and scrubbed himself hard, trying to work off his anger. He had tried over the past few days to accept what Spock had done, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't convince himself that it was justified. McCoy had said he had been what - seventy-two? Yet even at that age he was more qualified and better able to run a starship than Stocker.

He walked back into the bedroom and rummaged through his drawers looking for a clean uniform. As he dressed he thought of the terrible moment when Spock had stood in front of him and told him he was no longer in command, could no longer give orders - he was a useless, aging relic. He would never forget the feeling of betrayal that had swept through him, the anger which followed, and the helpless frustration at the frail body which could not strike out at his betrayer.

So he had turned away and had told Spock to get out. It was the only way he had left to hurt the Vulcan and he had done it in the cruelest way he could. He had not turned back to see the bleak look he knew would be in the

brown eyes. Spock had given him no mercy - he would receive none in return.

And, except for duty time, he had not seen Spock since. The Vulcan kept to himself and if he ate he did so in the privacy of his quarters. Out of necessity he talked to Kirk on the bridge, but only in the precise military terms required by his position.

Kirk did nothing to help. Too many things had happened too fast and he still had to come to grips with them.

He picked up a hairbrush and ran it through his mussed brown hair, remembering again the shock of the wrinkled face and white hair that had so recently stared back. He put the brush down and looked at the young, unlined face with the tired hazel eyes, the face which might someday again look so old.

He turned away from the mirror. He had had just about enough of seeing himself in that particular light. He searched under his bed for his boots, then sat down and pulled them on. He wondered which was worse, seeing himself as he would be one day, if he lived that long - a senile old man, too feeble to care for himself, much less function in the world - or seeing the vicious, selfish man that allowed him to live the life he wanted, the life of command, the life of the leader. How would that half survive - or perhaps that was why the old often seemed to fade away... Maybe the 'wolf' couldn't live knowing that now the 'good' was the stronger and could cope with the restrictions of age.

He stood up, pulling the gold shirt smoothly down over his hips. Spock had stood by him then, when he was twinned. When all evidence indicated with absolute certainty that he was some 'mad being', there was no wavering, no finger pointing. Spock's immediate reaction was that there had to be an imposter. There had been no hesitation, no doubt. His firm resolve had convinced a reeling, groping man that there was someone there to hold onto.

But where was that man now? When he had turned for help he was slapped in the face and had his world torn out from under him. What had happened to them since then? What had happened to a friendship that he had thought was firm and true for life?

"Maybe Bones is right," he mused as he walked down the dimly lit corridor. "Maybe I try too hard to get Spock to be Human when he's not and never will be. A Vulcan is different from us - maybe he'll always be different..."

"You're up mighty early, Captain."

Kirk turned around to see McCoy walking down the corridor, the doors to the Sickbay just sliding shut behind him. He grinned. "Bones, in all the years I've known you I have never seen you up at this hour unless we were on red alert and in deep trouble. What's up?"

"More like what's out. Appendectomy. You know, that little appendix has robbed more doctors of more sleep over the past centuries than any other part of the Human anatomy. Brother, I sure could use some coffee. Interested?"

"Sounds good to me."

They walked in companionable silence to the nearest rec room and got coffee. Kirk was absently stirring his when McCoy leaned back and looked at him.

"You still haven't answered me."

"About what?"

"Why you're up at this God-forsaken hour?"

Kirk looked down at his coffee. "No reason really. Guess I couldn't sleep."

"Um." McCoy's voice sounded skeptical. "Sure it's not more than that?"

Kirk glanced up. "Should it be?"

McCoy nodded. "After what just happened, yes, there should be more."

"You don't seem bothered by it."

"Jim, you and I are vastly different. I'm closer in age to the man I became because of that fool comet. Besides that, getting older intrigues me - the whole process of aging is a new, interesting happening. You never talk about it, but the thought of getting older scares you. You're at the age now where the future is yours, you are the man that others look to, measure themselves by and, for the most part, fall short. Someday your place will be taken by another man and you'll move on to something else. And you'll find it won't bother you then because you'll be older and other things will be more important. You'll step aside gracefully. Perhaps there might be a tinge of regret, but you won't feel the numbing fear of age that you do now..." He broke off as Kirk drained his coffee, almost like a drowning man. "Want some more?"

Kirk nodded and handed him his cup.

"Better yet, let's go to my quarters. I have some really fine brandy I've been saving. I think now's a good time to break it open." He stood up and waited expectantly.

Kirk hesitated. He knew what McCoy had said about his fear of aging was true, but he wanted to forget about what happened. "Bones, I don't think..."

"Jim, come on, you need it. I won't talk, I promise."



The brandy flowed through his system, the fine, mellow liquor gradually soothing his ragged nerves. McCoy, true to his promise, nursed his glass in contented silence, keeping an eye on Kirk without being obvious about it. He relaxed as he saw the tenseness leave Kirk's body as the brandy took hold.

Finally Kirk glanced at the chronometer. "Guess it's time to get to breakfast." He looked at the glass in his hand. "It's been a long time since I've started the day with a drink. Maybe it'll make facing Stocker a little easier..."

"And Doctor Wallace?"

The hazel eyes darkened as they held McCoy's. "Now you are overstepping boundaries, Doctor."

"Maybe. Well, I've got to hit the sack. I'm getting too old to stay up all night. I'll see you later, Captain."



Spock wasn't at breakfast. Funny, thought Kirk to himself as he got his tray, I still look for him, depend on his being here even when I never want to see him again. As he turned he almost bumped into Stocker.

"Good morning, Commodore."

"Good morning, Captain."

Kirk drew in a deep breath as he felt his resolve waver, but McCoy's 'medicinal' brandy made it much easier to get the words out than he had thought. "Will you join me for breakfast, sir? There are a few things I would like to talk to you about."



When Kirk stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge an hour later, he felt much better. He had made his peace with Stocker and was reasonably sure that never again would the man so hastily poke his nose into an area where he had no experience.

He was the last one to arrive. Everyone else was busy settling into their shift - Sulu and Chekov were running a checklist at their console, Uhura was transmitting a message to Starbase 10, relaying the *Enterprise's* estimated arrival time. He paused just outside the turbolift doors and looked at Spock. The Vulcan was staring down at his computer console, his mind seemingly far away. From where Kirk was standing, he couldn't see Spock's expression, didn't know what was keeping him so preoccupied.

The turbolift doors opened behind him and Janet Wallace walked out. She smiled at him a little uncertainly as he turned to see who it was. The smile wasn't returned.

"Do you need something, Doctor Wallace?"

"I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes, if you're not too busy."

He hesitated for a moment, hoping for a way out, then sighed mentally. This did seem to be the morning for baring one's soul. He might as well get as many done as he could.

"Mister Spock..."

The Vulcan did not respond but remained staring at the computer panel. Exasperated, Kirk walked over to him.

"Mister Spock, I am talking to you!"

Spock started momentarily, then turned to face Kirk, his face unreadable.

"Spock, are you all right?" Habit, concern for this man he thought a friend, surfaced over his exasperation.

"I am quite well, thank you, Captain. You wished to tell me something?"

"Uh, yes. I want you to take the con for awhile."

"Acknowledged."

For a moment their eyes met, cold, dark eyes meeting wounded hazel ones. Then Kirk turned away. Whatever they had shared was gone, there was nothing there to meet halfway.

They rode down to Deck 5 together, Jan watching the troubled man standing beside her. When the doors opened he ushered her out, then led the way to his quarters. As the door slid shut behind them, he turned to face her.

"Well?"

"Jim, you're being cruel!"

His eyebrows rose but he made no comment.

"We're going to arrive at Starbase 10 soon. It may be years before we see each other again."

"What do you propose we do?"

Her face reddened as they stood looking at each other. Finally he took pity on her.

"Jan, what you remember happened between two very young people who only had their own lives to enjoy and worry about. We're not those same people; our lives have taken very different directions. What we once shared isn't

there anymore - you proved that a few days ago when you offered me your 'going away present'..." He paused as she turned away to stare at the wall. "You don't love me, Jan, you love someone you knew six years ago. I'm not that man..." He reached out and gently turned her toward him. "I'm sorry, Jan..."

Her eyes held his, her face mixed with anger and anguish. "Jim, we haven't changed!"

He nodded. "Yes, we have, I know it and you know it. We're older, for one thing, and my life has certainly changed. This ship is my life now; maybe later there will be time for other things."

She looked at his hands resting on her shoulders. "You know, when I was married to Theodore, I used to pretend that he was you. I never really knew him, never let myself get close to him because of you..." She pulled away and turned for the door, then paused without looking back. "You have changed, Captain James Kirk, you have become as cold as your ship!" She walked out, leaving her angry words hanging in the air.

Kirk sat down on his desk feeling drained. Damn, this was proving to be one hell of a day. First McCoy, then Stocker... McCoy, what had he said? Men change as they get older, priorities change. He had loved Jan once, or thought he had. But she had been devoted to her work and he had a career. It had hurt at the time, but now he found it didn't bother him, the ship had priority and he didn't have to make the decision - there was none to make. The hurt of six years ago was totally gone.

Wearily he got to his feet and started back for the bridge. A friendship of six years ago could end without hurt, but what about a friendship of today? The hurt was definitely there.

"You look awful!"

"I thought you'd gone to bed?"

"I did. What have you been doing since we had that drink?"

"Listening to true confessions, and making a few of my own."

McCoy looked at him thoughtfully. "And?"

"And what?"

"Forget it. What pressing business do you have for the next couple of hours?"

"Nothing until we get to Starbase 10."

"All right, come with me."

Ten minutes later, McCoy left Kirk sleeping soundly in his quarters and headed for the bridge to tell Spock he had command until they reached the Starbase. The news was accepted without question or comment, a happening not lost on McCoy.



It was a much refreshed Kirk who waited in the transporter room to see Commodore Stocker and Janet Wallace beam down to Starbase 10. Scotty, as usual with any sort of VIP, had assigned himself transporter duty. Kirk had arrived a few minutes early and was talking quietly with him when Jan walked in. Kirk had his back to her and missed the look of resentment that was thrown his way. Scotty was surprised by her expression and missed what Kirk had just said to him.

"Pardon me, sir, I didn't quite catch that."

But Kirk had been alerted to Jan's presence and quietly turned.

"The Captain himself has come to see us off - quite an honor!" Her voice was biting.

"Jan..."

He was interrupted by Stocker's arrival. "Captain, you're sure you can't stay in orbit and have dinner with me?"

"Thank you, Commodore, it's a tempting invitation but that problem we encountered on Gamma Hydra 4 had put the Enterprise a little behind schedule. I'm afraid we'll have to pass up your hospitality on this trip. Hopefully the next time we're in this area we'll be able to take you up on it."

"I'll look forward to it with great pleasure."

Stocker gallantly ushered Janet Wallace onto the transporter platform. As she took her place, her eyes met Kirk's, hurt and puzzlement showing through her anger.

"Take care, Jan..." His voice was very quiet but it told her he hadn't wanted to hurt her.

She smiled slightly. "You too, Jim." She didn't understand fully yet what had happened but she had never been able to stay angry at him for long.

He turned to Scotty. "Energize."

Scotty mentally shook his head as he moved the levers. As often as he had watched Kirk interact with a woman, he somehow always had them in the palm of his hand when it came to goodbyes. Five minutes ago Janet Wallace had been ready to kill him, but one look had changed anger into caring. It was incredible.

Spock silently relinquished the command chair when Kirk returned to the bridge. Uhura had already contacted the Starbase and received clearance to leave orbit. Kirk gave the order to take them into space and settled back to study new orders that had been sent to the *Enterprise* from Starbase 10. He idly flipped through them until one caught his attention. He read through it quickly, then got up and turned to Spock.

"Mister Spock, I've..." He glanced up to see the cold eyes looking at him and stopped abruptly. Normally he would have shared the news with Spock, but looking at the unyielding figure he knew he couldn't now. He glanced down at the orders in his hand. "Uh, you have the con, Mister Spock. I'll be in my quarters if you need me."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Kirk turned to Sulu. "Change course to 112 mark 3, Mister Sulu. Hold her at Warp 1."

"Aye, sir, 112 mark 3."

Spock watched Kirk leave with a trace of puzzlement. Normally Kirk would have told him why he was making an unexpected course change, and would have definitely told him what the contents of the order was that had so obviously caught his interest. Slowly he walked to the command chair and sat down, trying hard not to notice the imprint of the man who had just left it. It was very obvious now that Kirk was not about to forget what Spock had done to him. Kirk had pulled away his friendship, his understanding. Spock was now being treated like any other member of the crew, spoken to when necessary, opinion asked when it was needed, an occasional compliment when the quality of his work demanded it.

Spock ran a hand over his eyes in an unnoticed, purely instinctive Human gesture. He felt hollow inside, as though some vital part was missing. He had followed regulations in precisely the order they were called for, and he had been totally wrong. He knew he wouldn't have even considered doing it if Commodore Stocker had not insisted. He was not in the wrong as far as regulations went. But being right didn't make the hurt any easier to bear. Kirk had turned away from him, lost and betrayed, and he hadn't turned back...

"Are you all right, Mister Spock?"

He had not seen Uhura approach. Quickly he took his hand away from his eyes. "I am quite well, thank you, Lieutenant. Did you wish something?"

"The Captain has called for a general briefing in half an hour." The soft brown eyes were clouded with concern as they looked at him, not reassured by his words. "That would leave you time to see Doctor McCoy..." The coldness that flooded his face made her words falter.

"I assure you there is nothing wrong, Lieutenant. I most certainly do not need to see Doctor McCoy."

"Yes, sir," she said in a small voice, then moved off to tell Sulu and Chekov.



Planet Dagus 9 was a small, rather insignificant body in the Canopus star system. Their technology had once, long ago, taken them into space on short journeys to neighbouring planets. Being a friendly people, they had sought contact with others, eager to learn and to share their own knowledge.

But the others that had come to Dagus 9 did not come as friendly visitors but as conquerors. They did not come to share but to take. After years of fierce battles, Dagus 9 finally emerged victorious. It was then that the planet leaders decided that never again would outsiders be allowed to come to Dagus 9, never again would alien ships be allowed to orbit her. They no longer built ships to travel into space; their technology was geared solely for defense. Their policy became one of total isolation - they lived in peace and they would not allow anything from the outside to disturb that peace. Outsiders were treated harshly, shown no mercy. Survival of Dagus 9 was of utmost importance. If it required death to maintain that peace, then they would accept the fact that they must kill, and to that end a special security force was trained. Violence was foreign to the average Dagian; it had to be instilled by special training allowed to only a few hand-picked elite of the security force.

Over the past fifteen months, three survey ships had gone to make preliminary contact and all three had disappeared without a trace. It was only recently that Starfleet had noticed this happening since the survey ships followed no set orders and did their work as they arrived, filing their reports after making contact and quite often not reporting where they were going next. All that had been known previously was that the three ships were in the Canopus star system when they disappeared. After some careful checking it was discovered that they had all intended to make Dagus 9 their next stop.

One of the orders Kirk had received concerned Dagus 9. Starfleet was concerned: the Federation was gradually starting colonies in that region and this could prove a real threat in that expansion.

The *Enterprise* did not have any pressing commitments at the moment and Dagus 9 was not very far from her projected course. Kirk had contacted Starfleet and was given the go-ahead to investigate.

When everyone gathered for the briefing, Kirk told them what he knew from reports and what he had discussed with Starfleet. They were heading into potential danger. It might be a freak coincidence that all three survey

ships had disappeared, or it might be something else. They were to go in and find out.

"I will take a security team and beam down," Kirk continued. "We'll go in native clothing and have transponders as well as communicators. Mister Spock, you'll be in command here."

Spock felt like he had been hit in the stomach. "Captain, as Science Officer I could..."

"No, Spock. I need men I can..." He hesitated as he realized what he had almost said. But he knew Spock had heard it anyway.

He had thought long and hard before he had decided not to take Spock with him. He needed people he could trust completely, who would obey him. They were heading into the unknown. He wouldn't have time to worry about what Spock was going to do.

"I need someone here to look after the ship," he continued. "You are the best qualified to command her."

Their eyes met. They both knew that Scotty was easily capable of handling what needed to be done. Spock looked away, afraid that his eyes would betray this latest hurt.

Kirk gazed at him for a few seconds longer, then looked up to include the others in the room. He was not taking any of his senior officers - he would be going with a detail of top security people. They would try to stay in contact with the ship, but in case of trouble would follow a rendezvous contact schedule. The transporters would be used only if there was no contact - then they were to be beamed up no matter what their condition.

Finally Kirk finished. He looked at the others to make sure he had their attention. "This is a hands-off planet, gentlemen. Under no circumstances are any of you to beam down for any reason. Aside from the original landing party, no one from the Enterprise is to leave the ship. Is that understood?"

There was a murmuring of uneasy assent. As Kirk dismissed them, he knew that McCoy was going to corner him so he waited until the others had left. Spock had walked out without even glancing at him, although Kirk had watched him every step of the way. If only he would give an inch, Kirk thought to himself. Then, pushing the thought aside, he turned to McCoy.

"Well?"

McCoy smiled slightly at Kirk's tone, then sobered. "You're wrong, you know."

"About what?"

"About not taking Spock. About trying to prove something to yourself that isn't necessary."

"Which is?"

"That you're the same man you were before Samma Hydra 4, that you have the same capabilities, that you're still the Captain."

"Bones, I made a fool of myself in front of the crew. Maybe they can forget if, I can't."

"From the praise Commodore Stocker heaped on you over that little trick to get away from the Romulans, I very much doubt that you have to prove anything to the crew. What about Spock?"

"I need him here."

"No, you don't. Any other situation like this you've always taken him with you. Why not this time?"

Kirk turned to leave. "It's a command decision, Doctor. I don't want to discuss it."

"Jim, you're heading into what could be real danger. Don't you think you should stop being so hard-headed about what Spock did and take him? You're going to need help down there."

"I'm being hard-headed?" Kirk turned at the doorway, not believing what McCoy had said. "Bones, that man almost wiped out my life with a wave of his hand. He didn't come to me to say he was going to do it, he didn't ask me or give me a chance to prove myself - he opened his damned manual and pointed to section and paragraph and told me I was incompetent and useless. Now you want me to take him with me? Starfleet duty is my life, and you know how important trust is when a man's life depends on the actions of someone else. How the hell do I know what Spock's going to do?"

"Jim, will you listen for a minute! How many times has Spock been the one standing between you and disaster..."

"What about Talos, Doctor? What about Omicron Ceti Three? How do I know that's not the real Spock?"

"Jim..."

But Kirk turned on his heel and left. He did not notice the slender figure pressed back against the wall at the corridor junction. Spock had stayed behind, waiting to talk to Kirk, to try to convince Kirk to let him go on the landing party. From the time the briefing room door opened, he had heard the exchange between Kirk and McCoy. He had heard Kirk admit openly that he no longer trusted his First Officer, that he didn't want to put himself in the position where his life might depend on the Vulcan. In a far corner of the Vulcan's heart something flickered, then died.



It was an oddly garbed group of men that gathered in the transporter room. They were dressed in jeans and tee shirts, Kirk's proudly bearing the picture of what seemed to be a pack of something called Bubble Gum. Each of the men had similar patterns on their shirts. McCoy was there to insert the transponders. Kirk had already worked out a call schedule with Uhura: all messages were to be scrambled in case they were somehow monitored.

Spock called them from the bridge. "No notice had been taken of our arrival, Captain. Lieutenant Uhura has been monitoring their broadcasts and no mention has been made of us. I have selected co-ordinates close to one of their major cities."

"Thank you, Mister Spock. Kirk out."

As he turned away he almost bumped into McCoy who had moved behind him. "Please be careful, Jim," he said in a low voice. "You don't even know what you're looking for."

Kirk sailed a little. "Don't worry so much, Bones. It's probably just coincidence that the survey ships were lost. This is probably just a planet full of peaceful people who want to be left alone."

"Yeah, the disappearance of the survey crews proves that much."

"Bones!"

"I know, my advice isn't wanted." He smiled a little. "Take care, Jim."

Kirk nodded. "We'll be back soon."



They materialized on some rolling farmland just at the outskirts of a large city. They appeared to have arrived undetected; the area was completely deserted. Kirk signalled the ship to tell of their safe arrival. They waited a short time to make sure they had been unobserved, then moved out of the covering woods and climbed the wire fence which separated them from the road. There was quite a bit of traffic - old style automobiles with combustion engines roared past. Fortunately the shoulders of the road were wide enough so they weren't in danger of being run down. The four of them set a brisk pace and soon entered the city.

For a time they became typical tourists. Never before had any of them seen a city quite like this one. The streets were full of people, some busily heading for a specific destination, others strolling along looking into store windows. A great number were sitting on benches in the huge park which seemed to dominate the middle of the city.

They stared at displays of cameras, radios, televisions and clothes, most looking like museum specimens of a long ago, almost forgotten period. Saunders, the chief security man, quietly took tricorder readings. Not knowing what they were looking for, Kirk had decided to get readings on everything.

They slowly passed through the city, seeing nothing that meant anything to any of them. Then Bradshaw caught up with them. He had stopped off momentarily at an art gallery they had passed.

"Captain, you're being followed."

Kirk never broke stride. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I've been behind you for five or six blocks and there are three men who are definitely pacing you. They stop when you stop; if you enter a building they break into a dead run to get into the same building with you."

Kirk frowned. He couldn't believe that anyone would have suspected they were aliens but why else would someone show such interest in them? They certainly had done nothing to attract attention.

They had entered a more deserted part of the city. There were few passers-by, and the buildings stood solid and forbidding, contrasting with the openness of the shopping area. Suddenly they were no longer alone - a group of uniformed men were coming toward them. Glancing back, Kirk saw the man Bradshaw had told him about.

"Looks like we've got company."

They stopped walking. The group of uniformed men opened out and surrounded them. They carried weapons but did not take them out.

"You will come with us." The leader of the group was a tall, hawk-nosed man with a gravelly voice and hard blue eyes.

"What have we done?" Kirk's surprise was genuine.

"The Prefect wishes to speak with you."

They were quickly searched and their communicators and phasers were taken, along with Saunders' tricorder. They were led into a nearby building and brought to a cold, grey room that had some chairs lined up against the wall. They were told to sit, then most of the guards left. A couple took up positions near the only door.

A short time later a handsome, pleasant-looking man came in. He glanced briefly at the men sitting by the wall, then turned and spoke to one of the guards who quickly departed.

"Well, gentlemen," he said as he turned, "we are always interested in visitors to our city, especially visitors who have come from so far away." His eyes carefully ran over each man before finally resting on Kirk. His gaze was

met squarely, causing a tiny smile to touch the corners of his mouth. "You are the leader of this group?"

"We are friends, sir, we don't have a leader."

"Yes, I am sure you are friends, but you are not of this planet. It is my job to find out about you and what plans you have for conquest..."

Kirk slowly stood. "We have no interest in 'conquest'. We have no possible means of doing so even if we had."

"You have a very large ship in orbit around this planet..." He noticed that the man standing seemed to take no apparent concern at his words, but the ones still sitting glanced at each other. These were indeed the four men that had disrupted the security beam surrounding the planet. "There is no use denying it, we have been monitoring you since you arrived. Space does not interest us, but when aliens start tampering with our world, we must act..."

The guard returned, bringing other men with him; they stood just inside the door. The Prefect motioned the three security men to go with them. They glanced at Kirk who was still standing and saw the slight nod. Wordlessly they got up and left.

"You will come with me." Two guards came up behind him. Kirk followed without protest.

An hour later found them at an impasse. All the Prefect had discovered was Kirk's name. Apart from that, Kirk had remained silent. Finally the man put down the pencil he had been fiddling with.

"We do not keep prisoners, Mister Kirk, except for the few who might prove useful. You are the leader of these men, although you deny it. It was to you they looked for guidance. You were the only one who seemed unaffected by our knowledge of your ship. If you will come to the window, you will see what we do to rid ourselves of unwanted invaders."

As Kirk watched, the Enterprise men were brought out of the building below. Off to the side stood a man with a strangely shaped gun. In rapid fire succession he fired three shots and the security men dropped.

A sharp intake of breath and clenched fists were the only reaction Kirk showed at the slaughter of his men.

"A relatively painless poison, it renders a man unconscious before it kills. Not the worst way to die." The Prefect turned away from the window and went back to his desk. He glanced at Kirk and the small smile returned. This was indeed a leader of men - watching the death of his friends did not instill terror in this man, only anguish that they had to die. He was different from the other strangers of recent times. They had broken quickly and their information was inadequate. But they had said others would follow. Now, obviously, they had.

"Well, Mister Kirk, if you would resume your seat we will continue our discussion."



The landing party was late with its rendezvous schedule. Lieutenant Uhura tried all channels and opened up an emergency beam - nothing worked. Silence was all that met her calls.

When McCoy came onto the bridge there was growing tension and concern as each attempt to contact the landing party proved as fruitless as the last. Spock was bent over his computers, seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him. When he finally straightened up, McCoy was fuming at his side.

"Well, Spock?"

"Well what, Doctor?"

"What are you going to do?"

The dark eyes met the fury of the blue ones with no apparent concern. "I am going to do nothing, Doctor. That is what I was ordered to do and at the moment that is what I am doing. The Captain has missed but one check - that is not in itself highly unusual."

"And if he's in trouble?"

"That is not known at this time, Doctor, and regulations forbid me to interfere even if there was trouble. If you will excuse me, I have work to do." He bent back over his computer.

McCoy watched him for a few moments, then stormed off the bridge, torn by anger and worry. As the turbolift doors closed, Spock straightened up again and had Uhura call Scott to the bridge.



For the moment the talking seemed to be done. Kirk had been taken from the room where he had watched his men die, to a small chamber. There he was stripped and given a very thorough, bruising search. When they finally let him get back onto his feet, they left him naked. One of the guards brought a strange machine and slowly ran it over Kirk. As it passed his left arm where McCoy had inserted the transponder, it made a strange, buzzing sound. The guards looked at each other, then two of them held him while the machine was passed over his arm again. The buzzer sounded again. One of the guards picked up an old fashioned scalpel and Kirk's arm was held out. He put up a brief struggle which resulted in getting hit hard in the stomach. He folded in pain and the guards held him on the floor while the transponder was removed. They left him lying there, his arm bloody, and took their find to their commander.

Spock and Scotty were in the transporter room. The landing party had just missed their second check-in. Scotty was busily setting the transporter lock to correspond with the transponders. Spock was standing impatiently at his side.

"That's got them, Mister Spock."

"Good. Energize."

Three limp bodies materialized on the transporter pad. Spock and Scotty looked at them in silence for a few moments, then Spock hit the intercom.

"Doctor McCoy, report to the transporter room immediately."

He went over to the bodies along with Scotty. There didn't appear to be a mark on any of them, no sign of a struggle, but they were undeniably dead. Before he had a chance to look any further, McCoy arrived.

"What the devil happened to them?"

Spock turned an impassive face to McCoy. "I do not know, Doctor. I called you here to give me that answer." Their eyes locked for a moment, then McCoy called Sickbay for three stretchers and his medical team.

"What about Jim?" asked McCoy as he turned away from the console. "Where is he?"

"Unknown, Doctor. We locked onto the transponder beams but only these men were brought up. I should think that the Captain has lost possession of his transponder or he would have surely been beamed up with the rest of the landing party."

"Is he alive?"

"I have no way of ascertaining that fact, Doctor. Now, I would appreciate it if you can tell me what killed these men as soon as possible." Spock turned and left with Scotty before McCoy could say anything else.

"You cold-blooded Vulcan!" said McCoy under his breath. "I think Jim was right not to trust you."



Once again Kirk was back in the Prefect's office. He was being held firmly by two guards and they were the only things stopping him from falling to the floor. His mouth was bloody and one of his eyes was rapidly swelling. For each question he refused to answer he was hit either in the stomach or in the face. He had tried to lash out once but was beaten for the effort.

"Come now, Mister Kirk, just tell us what this thing is that was taken from your arm, what these devices are which you were carrying. I promise things will go easier for you."

Kirk lifted his head a little. "No."

"A pity. I really do dislike using such barbaric force. However..."

Kirk had not expected the whip. He jerked forward, only to have the guards who were holding him pull him back. Each stroke brought new agony, new fire. He made no sound but his body betrayed his pain each time the whip landed. The commander watched with grim eyes.

Finally it stopped. He could feel the warm blood running down his back. He braced himself and stood straight, fighting for breath and fighting the incredible pain.

"All right, Kirk, you may remain silent if you wish. Your pain will eventually break you, your pain and the knowledge that your ship has been destroyed."

The pain-filled hazel eyes darkened.

"Yes, we have means of destroying invaders."

"I told you...we are not...invaders..."

"Take him. I do not have time to listen to lies!"



Spock ran the information through the computer again, and again he received the same answer. The planet was surrounded by an ultrasonic radio beam on such a high frequency that it would go unnoticed by ordinary sensor equipment. There was no way of beaming down to the planet surface without breaking that beam which was obviously some sort of warning device. The landing party had gone down unaware of it, and for that three of them had died. What had happened to Kirk? Why wasn't he with the others?

Scotty arrived in answer to his summons. He silently read the computer readout, then looked at Spock. "That ties it, then. They were spotted the minute they landed."

"Apparently. Is there any way you can see that the beam can be disrupted long enough to be able to pass through it undetected?"

Scotty looked at the report again, then shook his head doubtfully. "I'm not sure - I think Lieutenant Uhura should have a look at this, Mister Spock. Radio beams are more in her line of work than mine."

Spock stood up. "Very well, as soon as you have worked something out, let me know. I shall be on the bridge."

Scotty shook his head as Spock left. "When you have worked something out..." Didn't the Vulcan know that some

things might be impossible?

Spock stopped off in Sickbay on his way to the bridge. McCoy glanced up at him, then went back to his work. Spock waited patiently until he had finished.

"Poison," he said wearily, leaning back against the desk. "Minute puncture wound, lethal poison. I doubt they ever knew what hit them. They've been dead a couple of hours." He looked at the Vulcan. "What are you going to do now, Spock?"

"Nothing at the moment, Doctor."

"Nothing!" McCoy exploded. "I can't believe you, Spock. A full Vulcan isn't as cold as you are!"

"My orders..."

"To hell with your orders! Jim's down there somewhere, obviously in real trouble, and you babble away about orders!"

"The Captain said..."

"Spock, will you shut up and listen to me? Man does not live by rules and regulations, he lives by the seat of his pants. If you listen to Starfleet, you condemn James Kirk to death. Isn't it about time you started to realize what friendship is all about - how to give as well as get?"

"Doctor, I don't think..."

"Then it's damn well about time you did! What have you ever done to deserve what Kirk has done for you? You were virtually an outcast and he welcomed you to life, no holds barred, nothing asked. Hell, in the past few months he's ignored direct orders from Starfleet to take you to Vulcan..."

Surprise flickered in Spock's eyes.

"He made me promise not to tell you but it's about time you realized how close he came to being busted out of the service because of you! Komack gave him direct orders not to go to Vulcan and do you know what he said? 'I can't let Spock die, can I, Bones? He's my friend. I owe him my life a dozen times over. Isn't that worth a career?'"

Spock turned away, unable to face McCoy's fury.

"And that's not all. He almost died in order to save your father. When you wouldn't raise a finger to help because you were following your blasted regulations, he struggled out of bed and said he couldn't damn you for your loyalty. Spock, when are you going to understand that that man loves you? I'm hanged if I can understand why..."

"He refused to take me on this mission," Spock's voice was very low and unsteady. "I heard what he told you in the briefing room. He doesn't want me next to him."

McCoy grabbed Spock and spun him around so that the Vulcan couldn't hide from him. "Have you given him any reason to feel otherwise? Did you go to him and try to explain? Did you do anything to let him know how you felt about what you did?"

"No, he turned away..."

"Then you couldn't have tried very hard. Spock, he was crying inside because of what you did. He thought he had a friend who would stand beside him no matter what, as he had always done for you. Prove to him that you're that friend..."

Spock raised stricken eyes to McCoy's face, then turned and left the Sickbay without a word.



They pulled him out of the cold, dark room and they beat him again. Each time the whip landed he was asked for information and each time he shook his head. He had finally fallen to his knees when the Prefect walked in. He glanced at the bloody figure, then turned to his men.

"He has said nothing?"

"He has not even cried out, Prefect. I have never seen a man endure what he has without breaking."

"Interesting. He is indeed different from the ones who came before. However, it is time we dealt with his ship. Put him back in his cell, let his pain deal with him for a while. Once his ship has been destroyed, I will interrogate him again myself."

They hauled Kirk to his feet and dragged him out. Within minutes he was again in the cold, clammy blackness of his prison. His legs refused to hold him once the guards released him and he sank slowly to the floor, his body trembling from the shock of the beating. He fought for control over the pain and the desperation that was threatening to overwhelm him. The sight of his men murdered in front of him shone in the darkness. He wrapped his arms around his legs and pulled them up to his chest, trying to hold in a little body heat, then buried his face into his knees.



"We can do it, Mister Spock. If we put the phasers on 1/100th power and aim a concentrated beam at one spot,

we should be able to disrupt the beam long enough to send down a landing party."

"There will be no landing party, Mister Scott. I shall beam down alone."

"But, Mister Spock..."

"The Captain's orders were that no one was to follow him down. I cannot order anyone to disobey. I am going on my own authority. I'll need you here in command. It is apparent that the survey crews met a similar fate, but as yet what happened to their ships is unknown. If anything does threaten the *Enterprise*, you are the best one to deal with the problem."

"You should at least take Doctor McCoy."

"He is not to be told I am going, Mister Scott."

Scotty's eyebrows rose slightly at the barely controlled anger in Spock's voice, but he said nothing. It was obvious that the First Officer and Chief Surgeon had been at odds again.

"I will beam down to the co-ordinates from which we brought up the bodies of the security detail," continued Spock. "Can you be ready in a half hour?"

"Aye, Lieutenant Uhura's working on it now."

"Good. I shall meet you in the transporter room in thirty minutes."



A little over half an hour later, Spock was standing against the wall of a large, forbidding-looking building. He did not signal that he had arrived; he could signal the ship only once and that would be when he had Kirk.

He slipped through the unlocked door and into the building. He was not dressed in his Starfleet uniform but all in black, a black sweater over black pants, a black knit hat pulled down over his ears. He didn't know what he was going to do; he only knew he had to somehow manage to get to Kirk. Chances were he was somewhere in this building, since this was where the security men had died.

He moved silently down the corridor, carefully easing open doors and looking into every room he passed but he found nothing. He came to a staircase at the end of the corridor and stood undecided for a few minutes over which direction he should go. Some instinct told him down, and he quietly descended.

"We are ready, Prefect. We have the ship lined up..."

He was interrupted by one of the guards. "Pardon me, Prefect, but the bodies of the three strangers have disappeared."

"What do you mean, they've disappeared?"

"A few minutes ago, a detail went to remove them and they weren't there. We can't find them anywhere."

"Check with Security. Maybe they got there before you. Report back to me when you've found them."

"Yes, Prefect."

Spock pressed back against the wall as the man passed him. For a moment he thought about following him, then decided to press on in the direction he had been going. Moving quietly, he came to an open door and, cautiously looking in, saw men and machinery and heard what was about to happen. He listened intently for a few minutes, then retreated back down the corridor and took out his communicator.



Thanks to Spock, when the attack came the *Enterprise* was prepared, her shields on full. Scotty and Sulu gradually eased out of orbit while the transporter room flushed out debris that would make it look as though they had been destroyed. They silently slipped out of orbit behind their smoke screen. In half an hour they would make one pass back in to get Mister Spock and the Captain. If they weren't able to contact Spock, they would head out into open space and contact Starfleet. This plan would give Spock very little time to find Kirk, assuming he was still alive.



"We have debris on our scanners, Prefect. The ship appears to have been destroyed."

"It no longer registers?"

"No, sir."

The Prefect turned away from the machine. "Good, now I have time to deal with Kirk."

Spock tailed him as he went down the corridor. He melted into a dark recess as the man stopped to talk to some guards.

"Bring him to my office in twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes," thought Spock. 'Almost the time for the *Enterprise* to be making her pass.' He slipped out of his shelter and moved back down the corridor. He opened his communicator and set the emergency signal. He would have to risk the communication being picked up. He didn't dare risk the *Enterprise* missing a late signal. Putting the communicator back on his belt he cautiously made his way toward the now open door. He paused a little

uncertainly in the dark alcove and listened.

"Sure you don't want to talk, Kirk?"

There was a sickening crunch as if something had been kicked hard by a heavy boot. The almost stifled gasp definitely came from Kirk.

"Stubborn little runt, aren't you? Well, your ship's just been destroyed. You're all by yourself, little man, and we've got all the time in the world."

There was a slight pause, then the voice came again. "Get him on his feet."

There was a scuffing sound, then the unmistakable sound of a fist meeting flesh. The moan of pain tore through to Spock's soul. He couldn't wait any longer.

The bully who had been hitting Kirk dropped without a sound. The two men who were holding Kirk were hampered by his leaning body and quickly joined their unconscious comrade. Spock managed to catch Kirk before he, too, hit the hard stone floor. Gently he eased him down, then went to the door and pulled it shut, locking it behind him. The overhead light was still blazing, showing Spock the grim beating that Kirk had undergone. The smooth skin on Kirk's back was just a bloody memory, the damage done by the whip extensive. His face was a mass of bruises and one eye was swollen shut. There were many bruises covering the rest of his body.

Spock moved him to the far side of the cell, then gently lowered him to the floor, quickly sitting and supporting him in his arms. Kirk moaned as Spock's arm crossed his injured back. Spock was momentarily at a loss as to what to do.

"Jim?"

There was no response, no flicker of recognition.

"Jim, it's Spock. Can you hear me?"

Kirk only moaned again.

"Jim, I'm going to try a meld, try to relieve some of your pain..." His fingers touched the bruised face, feeling for the familiar points of entry. His eyes narrowed as he met the full force of Kirk's agony. Gradually he drew some to himself, enough so Kirk would not be overwhelmed by shock before he could get him to McCoy.

Slowly Kirk's eyes opened. At first he didn't seem to focus clearly, then he looked at Spock. "I thought... told you...stay on the ship..."

Spock nodded, a tiny smile showing at the corners of his mouth at the reprimand. "Yes, Captain, you did, but events deemed it necessary that I should disobey you."

A shudder ran through Kirk and he bit his lip hard to stop from crying out at the pain. Gradually he won the battle. When he could think more clearly again the slight smile was returned. "What about...regulations?" The voice was low and shaking.

"Friendship does not go by regulations, Jim - the rules sometimes have to be decided by something other than logic."

"Friendship..." Kirk gradually went limp in Spock's arms. Fear swept through the Vulcan until he found Kirk's pulse. It was weak and rapid, but at least it was still there. Five minutes till rendezvous.

He heard them coming down the hall, heard the exclamations when the guards were found to be missing. The door shook, then rattled under the hammering, but did not give.

Slowly Spock stood up, cradling Kirk's limp body in his arms. Three minutes. Loud voices sounded on the other side of the door, to be followed by running footsteps. Two minutes. The footsteps returned. Carefully Spock shifted Kirk in his arms and took out his phaser. One minute. The key rattled in the lock accompanied by a cursing voice, then the door opened to reveal three unconscious guards in an otherwise empty cell.



Spock sat drained and exhausted in Sickbay, watching as McCoy worked on Kirk. He had met them in the transporter room as they had beamed aboard, Spock's dark sweater soaked with Kirk's blood. They did not speak as they moved to Sickbay and they had not spoken during the time McCoy worked.

Scotty came in almost unnoticed. "Starfleet wants you to make a report, Mister Spock." For a moment he didn't think Spock had heard him, then the Vulcan slowly stood up.

"I shall be in my quarters, Doctor."

McCoy grunted but didn't look up. Spock's eyes rested on Kirk for a few moments, then he turned and left.

"Doctor?" McCoy glanced up to see Scotty's worried face.

"It's bad, Scotty. He's in deep shock and has lost a lot of blood."

Scotty nodded slowly. "Well, I'll be on the bridge."

"I'll let you know."



Spock had made his report to Starfleet and was changing his clothes when the door buzzer sounded. He pulled on his uniform shirt, then activated the lock. He was surprised to see McCoy standing there.

"May I come in?"

Spock nodded. It was very rare for McCoy to come to his quarters and usually it was James Kirk that brought him.

McCoy stepped just inside the door. "He'll live, Spock, thanks to your meld." He smiled slightly. "Jim told me what you did down there, or at least what he remembers, which isn't much..." His eyes darkened. "Now, why the hell did you go down there without me?"

Spock's eyebrows lifted. "Because you told me I had to, Doctor, or words to that effect." Their eyes held, for once in complete understanding.

"You'd better get to the Sickbay. He's staying conscious by a thin thread of determination. He wants to talk to you."



The room was dimly lit. Kirk was lying on his stomach, his back packed with medication and sterile coverings. Spock stood quietly at the doorway, not sure if Kirk was sleeping.

"Come in, Spock." There was a slight intake of breath as Kirk moved his head and pain coursed through his body.

The Vulcan moved to the bed and sat on the chair near the head. Silently they looked at each other, then Kirk held out a hand.

"Friends?"

Spock gently took Kirk's hand in both of his. "Friends."

Kirk smiled a little. "I was wrong to doubt."

"And I was wrong to listen to Commodore Stocker. There are times regulations should be ignored."

"Um, I'll remember that at your court-martial." He lay silent for a few minutes, then looked at Spock again. "Thanks..."

Spock inclined his head slightly. "Starfleet has been warned, Captain, and Dagus 9 has been quarantined. They appear to desire no outside contact and should be left alone."

"Yes, they do seem to take notable exception to strangers..." His hand tightened on Spock's as a stab of pain shot through him.

"Jim, you need McCoy..."

"No, I'm all right."

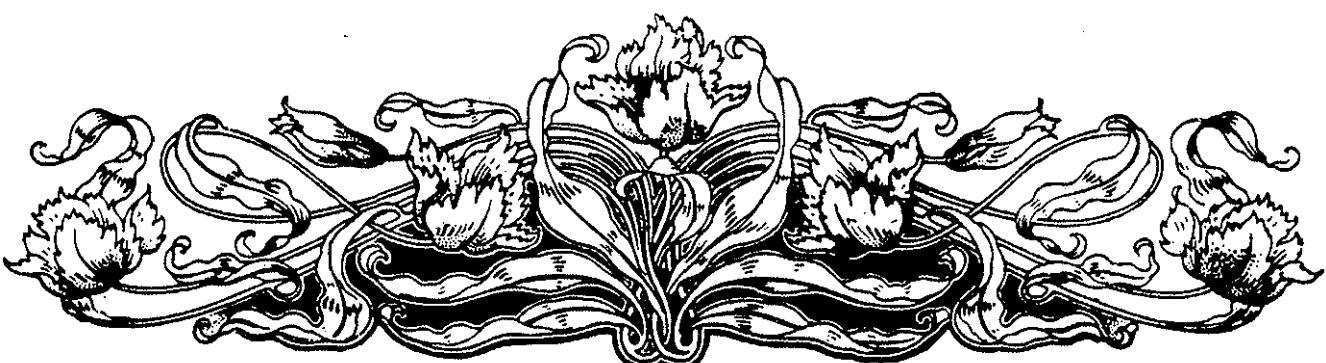
"At least try to sleep."

"Never was much good on my stomach." But he closed his eyes and within a few minutes his breathing slowed to the deep, regular movements of sleep.

Spock remained sitting with Kirk's hand in his. Even in his sleep Kirk's grip had not relaxed but Spock didn't mind. He was content to maintain the physical contact which was beginning to mean so much to them both.

McCoy came in at regular intervals to check on Kirk. Never once did he comment on Spock's presence. He had said all he felt he had needed to. He would not embarrass Spock by stating the obvious.

The hours passed slowly. Occasionally Kirk would wake up, momentarily disoriented and bordering on the edge of panic, but Spock would still be there, holding his hand, his quiet presence calming Kirk instantly. And sometime during that long night, the firm understanding of friendship was permanently instilled.





It is a curiosity of man that he only gives his deepest respect after some sort of combat. Whether the struggle is physical, emotional, intellectual, or whatever, we save our strongest ties for those with whom we have shared the hottest fires.

...Dave Kindred

"Admiral?" Komack looked up at the hesitant question, causing his yeoman to quail at his irritated expression, but she swallowed hard and continued. "Urgent communication from the Enterprise, sir, requesting your immediate attention."

"Which ambitious cadet is snitching now?"

"It's from Captain Pike himself, sir."

Komack stared at her. He considered Chris Pike an ally of sorts, one of the few officers Komack had kept track of after he left the Academy where Komack had commanded for so many years. "Well," he said finally, "don't just stand there clutching the tape."

He waited until the yeoman had left, then put the tape into the viewer. His face grew dark with anger as he listened to Pike's message, finally slamming his fist down to stop the transmission. "So that's what you think about the personnel I assign you, is it?" he muttered. "I protected you for a long time, Chris, and this is the thanks you give me for it." He got up and walked over to the window. "Well, Captain, from now on you're on your own, and I'll be throwing you the best surprise the Empire has to offer..." A smile crossed his face. "...and the most ruthless. Sleep well tonight, my friend, it will be your last!"



"Holy shit!"

Spock looked up in surprise at Pike's uncharacteristic outburst. "Is there some problem, Captain?"

"Where's Sulu?" demanded Pike. "He's going to pay for this with his hide!"

"Ensign Sulu is still in the sickbay," replied Spock. "If you recall, Number One's knife opened quite a cut down his face."

"A pity it didn't go right into his brain!" said Pike savagely as he got to his feet, leaving without a backward glance at the Vulcan.

For a few minutes Spock sat in silence, the echoes of Pike's footsteps slowly dying away. Even though he was now alone in the briefing room, Spock carefully looked around before getting up and moving to the viewer. A quick glance showed him that Pike had indeed been too upset to put the Starfleet communication under voice lock. He replayed the tape, his eyebrow slowly rising as the information flashed on the screen. He stared at it, then switched it off after putting the information safely under command voice lock.



Sulu was lying pale and still when Pike stormed into the sickbay. The long knife wound marked a vivid line down the side of his face. By Pike's orders, it had been stitched with old-fashioned instruments. Sulu would carry the remainder of his folly for the rest of his days. A hard hand nearly snapped his head off.

"You don't deserve to live!" said Pike, his voice shaking with rage.

"What the hell...?" started Sulu.

"You're so eager to advance, Ensign. You just couldn't wait for the natural order of things. You thought if you murdered my First Officer that you'd get some sort of reward. Well, you've got it Mister, we've all got it. I want you to lie here and contemplate the future. Think of the one man in Starfleet that you wouldn't want to deal with. Think of the man who is going to go over the top of everybody all the way to Starfleet Command, then thank yourself for being the reason he's going to be on this ship..."

"Chris, what the devil are you doing?" Phil Boyce came in while Pike was shaking Sulu. "Here now, leave him alone!" He pulled Pike away.

Pike glared at him. "Protect him while you can, Doctor," he said. "If he makes just one slip, just one, I'll be waiting." He stared at Sulu for a moment, then turned and left.

Sulu gingerly touched his face, the pain throbbing more fiercely than ever. "I have a feeling he's not happy with Number One's replacement."

"Ah, so Starfleet's finally acted on that one. Did he say who it was?"

"No, not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly?"

"Ask him," said Sulu.



Captain Robert Wesley walked into his quarters feeling almost weak with relief. "What have I done to earn this favor from you, Komack?" he asked himself quietly. "Heaven knows I raised enough of a stink when I first got collared with him, but you said he'd be a good officer, and there's no way I can fault his service here. I'm just damned lucky to be getting him off my ship without having to be dead to do it." He poured himself a stiff drink, then hit the intercom.

"Lieutenant Commander Kirk, report to the Captain's quarters immediately."



"Trouble," said Farrell as he helped Kirk replace the casing of the photon torpedo launcher.

Kirk looked at his burly bodyguard with a grin. "Have you been up to something I should know about, Chief?"

For a minute Farrell looked insulted, then he realized Kirk was teasing him. "Not so you'd get pulled onto the carpet, sir. Just the usual business involved with keeping everybody in line..."

"And my head connected to my shoulders," acknowledged Kirk. He finished with the casing, then stood up. "Well, that shouldn't explode now the next time someone energizes the weapons." He held up a small device. "Unusual design. I'd like you to track down the creator. I want to know how this was made."

"Consider it done," said Farrell. He hesitated as Kirk started away. "Uh, shouldn't I go with you?"

Kirk turned back, his face totally innocent. "Why, Farrell, I've only been invited to the Captain's quarters. He probably wants to share a glass of his famous brandy!"

"Yeah, well, be careful. It might be poisoned."

"That is beneath Wesley's dignity," replied Kirk lightly. "Besides, if I die there, he knows his own death is assured. You've built quite a reputation for yourself, Chief."

"Comes with being associated with good people, sir," answered Farrell with a grin. "I'll see about that inventor you're interested in."



"Come," said Wesley as the buzzer sounded. He watched in silence as Kirk walked in, noting he had come alone, or at least none of his operatives were stationed within sight.

Kirk put a small device down on the desk in front of Wesley. "The torpedoes are operative again, sir."

Wesley picked up the small cube. "Who?"

"Farrell will know shortly."

"And?"

Kirk looked at him for a moment. Wesley rarely asked about reprimands. "It depends on who it is, and why the sabotage was done."

"More death, Kirk?"

"Captain, you have never questioned my methods in the past. Is there some reason they have become unsatisfactory?"

"No," said Wesley shortly. He gestured to an empty chair. "Sit down, Jim. Like a drink?"

Kirk hesitated. He had served just under a year with Wesley. Never before had the Captain called him by his first name, and never had he offered him a drink.

Wesley looked up. "What's the matter, scared I'll try to poison you?"

Kirk shook his head. "You wouldn't be that foolish."

Wesley chuckled. "I'll say this much for you, Kirk, you're honest, and that's something rare in this Empire of ours. Go on, sit down."

Kirk sat and took the glass Wesley handed him. "Your private stock, sir?"

Wesley nodded. "Consider it a going away present."

Kirk stiffened and felt the hair rising on the back of his neck. Had he totally underestimated this man? Then he slowly relaxed. He trusted his instincts. He knew Wesley. He was not a man who would kill without good reason and Kirk was sure he had not given him one. "Am I going somewhere, Captain?"

Wesley nodded. "All the way to the top of Fleet Command, if you can trust the grapevine." He looked at Kirk. "Is that your real ambition?"

A cold smile crossed Kirk's face. "Shouldn't it be?"

"Dunno. I've never liked the men in command there myself. Ruthless bunch, forgotten how to feel."

"The Empire leaves no room for personal feelings," said Kirk quietly. Wesley's glance told Kirk that his commanding officer saw more than he should. He took an appreciative sip of brandy, returning Wesley's look. "To get back to the original subject, sir..."

"Oh, yes. This came from Starfleet a couple of hours ago..." He tossed a tape over to Kirk and waited in silence while the man read it. From the lack of expression, he could tell nothing of Kirk's reaction. "Well?" he asked finally.

"Any promotion is gratifying," said Kirk guardedly.

"But you'd rather not land on the Enterprise, is that it? Kirk, promotion to full Commander and now First Officer at your age? How many more records are you after?"

"I'm not after any," said Kirk shortly. "I do my job. If others see it as ambition, that's their problem!"

"Hey, hold it," said Wesley, holding up a hand. "You don't have to yell at me about it. It's Komack's job to interfere in your life, not mine."

"Well, he's just interfered beautifully," said Kirk as he got up. "There's a lot of death on that ship, Wesley."

"There's death everywhere."

"Not like that. Pike's got a guard that would die to a man to protect him. He's been Captain for more years than most have any right to expect to survive..."

"A stumbling block in your career, Kirk?"

Kirk looked at him. "Maybe."

Wesley nodded. "Better him than me, son. Go on, finish your brandy, then you'd better pack. We rendezvous with the Enterprise in six hours."



"Wait here," said Spock quietly to his ever-present Vulcan bodyguard. "If I have not come out in fifteen minutes, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir." The man stepped into the shadows at the corridor junction and took up his watch. Spock glanced at him, then pressed the buzzer to Pike's quarters.

"Come." Pike's voice sounded a little slurred and, as the door opened, Spock wondered if the man had been drinking again. "Ah, Spock, come in." Pike waved his hand vaguely in the direction of an empty chair. "Have a seat."

"No, thank you. I prefer to stand."

"Protecting your back, eh, Spock. Have I ever told you that you remind me of a panther? A black panther, always in the background, stalking its prey, ready to pounce when your adversary shows any weakness..." He gulped down his drink.

Spock waited patiently. He had seen Pike like this many times. The captain might appear to be drunk, but could be instantly sober when the need arose. The men who had mistaken this show for the real thing were all dead.

"I wanted this to be a happy occasion, Spock, a celebration of your promotion." He looked at the Vulcan's impassive face. "Damn you," he snarled. "Why can't you react like a man?"

"I assume you wish me to express curiosity concerning why you summoned me here..."

"What the hell else would I mean?"

Spock clenched his fists behind his back. Little did Pike know how often he pushed the Vulcan to the edge of control, but Spock owed Pike his life, a reality that Spock would not let himself forget. Pike had kept a raw Starfleet cadet alive until that cadet had figured out how to assure his own survival. Since that time Pike had made it very plain that he considered the Vulcan a threat, and therefore expendable, but Spock carefully gave him no

reason to act. "I would suggest then that you impart that information so I may return to my work," he said coldly.

Suddenly Pike was sober. "We're rendezvousing with the Lexington in a couple of hours..."

"Two hours, seventeen minutes..."

"And an odd number of seconds, I know." Pike looked at Spock. "I'd hate to have to exist with a brain like yours..."

"You are straying from the subject at hand."

Pike nodded. "All right, Komack's given us a new First Officer, totally disregarding my recommendations, and probably signing our death warrants."

"Having observed how you recommend things, I would assume you managed to offend the Admiral. May I ask who the new officer is?"

"James T. Kirk." Pike looked closely at Spock, knowing that this time there would have to be a reaction.

There was none. No raised eyebrow, no change of expression. "A most able officer," said Spock finally.

"A most able officer?" exploded Pike. "Spock, he's taking the promotion right out of your hands!"

"Captain, I do not want a promotion. I am satisfied with my scientific duties..."

"Bull," said Pike. "You're a survivor, Spock, and survivors have ambition." He stood up. "I've known you for a long time, first at the Academy when I was an instructor, now here under my command, yet I don't know what drives you. I've known most men around me, their fears, their greed." He looked closely at Spock. "But I don't know you, what keeps you loyal."

"Does there need to be a reason?"

Pike nodded. "Loyalty needs a reason, even for a Human. Logically this would apply even more to your race." He turned away. "So, James Kirk doesn't scare you."

"No."

"Then I can depend on you to side with me and not with him?"

This time Spock's eyebrow did rise. "I do not take sides, Captain."

"Unless it suits your purpose!" said Pike, whirling around. "You've fought with me before, why not now?"

Spock looked at him in disgust. Pike was obviously scared of Kirk and wanted protection. "I see no point in continuing this conversation. I will be at my post if you need me for something important."

"I'll remember this, Spock!" yelled Pike at his departing figure. "I'll remember that you turned your back when I asked for your help..." The closing door shut off whatever else Pike wanted to say.

Spock's bodyguard materialized out of the shadows, his eyebrows raised in question. Spock shook his head. "A useless period," he said quietly. "Return to your duties, but pass the word that the rumor is correct and the everyone must remain alert until positions are drawn." Spock continued alone to the bridge admitting that he was indeed interested in meeting the man who had managed to upset his normally unflappable commanding officer.



Kirk rubbed his already bruising arm, his hazel eyes burning with anger. "Is this how Starfleet officers are normally greeted aboard your ship, Captain?" Farrell stood slightly in front of him, the limp body of the now dead attacker slipping from his hands. Bob Wesley pushed himself away from the wall of the transporter platform. It was Kirk's quick move as they materialized that had saved Wesley's life and Farrell's equally quick reaction that had caused the heavy piping to hit Kirk's arm, and not cracked open his skull.

"Merely discovering the extent of your loyalties," said Pike mildly, but his eyes raked over Kirk. He turned to Spock. "Captain Wesley and I have business to discuss. Take Kirk to his quarters and answer any questions he may have." He looked back at Kirk. "I'll send for you later." He turned and started out.

Wesley stopped beside Kirk. "Looks like life could be exciting around here." He nodded slightly and left behind Pike.

And brief, thought Kirk as he drew a deep breath to control his anger, then he looked at Spock who was still standing at the side of the transporter console, hands clasped behind his back. Kirk noted the gleam of interest in the brown eyes and returned the look steadily. "You must be Spock."

The Vulcan bowed his head slightly. "I assume you are Kirk." Suddenly the Human smiled and Spock was a little startled at the transformation from the very dangerous man who had been there seconds before, to a man that, for a split second, Spock felt himself drawn.

"Friend or enemy?"

"Neutral. Are you always this direct?"

"Usually. It saves time. Well, our gracious Captain said you would show me to my quarters. Shall we?" The trip was made in silence, Kirk and Spock taking stock of each other, Farrell and Spock's ever present shadow doing the same.

"What's he like, Bob?" asked Pike as he handed Wesley a drink.

"Why should I tell you?" asked Wesley. "That was a dirty trick back there."

"I wasn't going to have you killed. If anybody had died, it would have been him," said Pike harshly. "Now answer my question."

Wesley took a sip of his drink. "Cheap stuff," he said mildly. "I can't answer you, Chris. I don't know what he's like. I can tell you he grew up in the roughest streets of Terra where he learned to survive. I wouldn't cross him if I were you."

"So he knows how to survive. Another Spock." Pike refilled his glass. "His loyalties?"

"To himself." Wesley put the glass down, the brandy offending his connoisseur's palate. "He is a good officer, efficient in his work. He was on the Lexington for almost a year and never once did he give me reason to question him."

"Yet you're glad to be rid of him."

"Wouldn't you be?"

Pike nodded, a slight smile touching his face. "He won't find things quite so much to his liking here. We don't scare easily on the Enterprise."

Wesley looked at him. "Don't push him, Chris, not unless you have an awfully good reason. He'll serve you well if you let him, if you don't make him your enemy."

"Oh, for pete's sake, Wesley, we all know what Kirk is, what his ambitions are. I'll be damned if I let him use me as a stepping stone!"

"You'll be dead if you don't," said Wesley quietly. "Well, I'd better get back to my ship." He pulled out his communicator. "If you don't mind, I'll beam back from here, just in case you're not satisfied with the one try."



Kirk sat on the edge of his desk listening to Spock, feeling a stir of respect as the Vulcan described the Enterprise and her crew without once ever letting his own feelings emerge, never once stating more than could be discovered by probing the data file.

They were alone in Kirk's quarters. Kirk had sent Farrell out to look around and, seeing that Kirk was willing to be alone in his presence, Spock had let his own shadow leave, although Kirk suspected he would not be far away.

"You haven't said anything about Pike," said Kirk as Spock fell silent.

The Vulcan hesitated for the first time. "There is little to say. His record speaks for itself."

"His record shows the facts of a vicious, ambitious officer of Starfleet and I'm not interested in that aspect of the man." He looked at Spock thoughtfully. "He has some sort of hold on you, doesn't he?"

"He has my loyalty, if that's what you mean."

"Bought or earned, Spock?"

Their eyes held for a moment, then Spock looked down. "Does it matter?"

"It might."

Spock looked back at Kirk. "I do not believe my relationship with Pike is any of your business."

Kirk nodded slowly. The Vulcan was honest, a rare thing in the Empire. He would be a valuable ally should one be needed, and if he could win him away from Pike and whatever hold the Captain had on him, or Spock felt that he had. Kirk suspected it was the latter.

"So my predecessor was knifed by the apprentice navigator."

"Her death was a waste of good material. However, your reputation precedes you. I doubt if you will come to the same end."

"Is that why Pike's scared of me?" Kirk hoped the sudden change of subject would catch Spock off guard, but there was no response.

"Captain Pike has not discussed his feelings concerning you..." he started.

"Spock," said Kirk quietly, "don't lie to me. You are one of the few honest people I've met in Starfleet. If you can't tell me the truth, I'd rather you not say anything."

"Very well. Will that work both ways?"

Kirk laughed out loud. "Probably not. Have you ever known a Human to be completely honest?" He smiled at the Vulcan, then got up and walked across the cabin, finally stopping by the small pile of luggage he had brought with him. So it begins again, only this time I am one step further up the ladder and, as such, am even more marked for death. Suddenly he realized what he was doing and spun around, anger at himself for showing Spock something he didn't want him to see flashing from his eyes. "Is there anything else you need to tell me?" he asked in an icy voice.

Kirk's sudden anger caught Spock by surprise, but he shook his head. "No, unless you have any specific

questions."

"Only the one you refuse to answer. Get out, Spock. I have to unpack before duty shift starts."

Spock was deep in thought as he walked down the corridor away from Kirk's quarters. He did not notice when his bodyguard emerged from the shadows and quietly followed him. Kirk was different from what he had expected. He was intelligent, quick to assess situations, obviously ready to kill when the need arose, but the man had also inadvertently shown some other qualities - sensitivity in the way he picked up on the things Spock had left unsaid, and for a brief, unexpected moment, had shown a glimpse of the same loneliness that plagued the Vulcan.



Kirk was halfway through his unpacking when the buzzer sounded. He was reaching for the knife at his waist when the buzzer sounded again in the code that Farrell always used. He slipped the knife back in its place and pressed the lock release.

"No trouble, sir," said Farrell with a smile as he walked in. "In no time at all I ran into twenty of my old mates and they were quickly convinced that you were the man to serve."

"Loyal?"

"Scared," said Farrell, "of me, terrified of you. Aye, they'll be loyal unless we run into someone who wields more power, and that's not too likely."

"What did you find out about Pike's men?"

Farrell blew out his breath. "Well, it's hard to say. As far as I can figure it, they'll follow him to a man no matter what the situation. Pike's never been beaten at anything, and you know yourself the confidence it inspires. As to what would happen in a power struggle, I couldn't say."

"There's not going to be a power struggle," said Kirk sharply. "You've been listening to the scuttlebutt again. That's not my way, Farrell."

"Maybe not," said Farrell quietly, "but it's best not to advertise it. You get more respect through fear."

"I know," said Kirk, "and I expect that will be even more true aboard this ship." He looked at Farrell. "Pike's scared of me, so we're going to have to watch our step. He's already set one trap that we managed to avoid, and I'm sure there'll be others. He's not going to be like Wesley. He's not going to give me a chance to show him who I am."

"Would you if the positions were reversed?"

Kirk paused for a moment. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Farrell, what about Spock?"

"The Vulcan? Well, he's from a wealthy family, scuttle had it he joined Starfleet purely for the hell of it. He's shrewd, keeps to himself, and has a small guard..."

"That's usual for someone of his rank."

"...composed entirely of Vulcans."

"Oh." Kirk glanced at the chronometer. "Well, I'd best finish unpacking. Duty shift starts in half an hour and I have a feeling being late would be considered a court-martial offense around here. Keep digging around, Farrell, find out anything useful you can. Oh, tell my new operatives that I'll meet with them at the end of shift. Before then, find me a place where I can talk to them without being overheard by half the flapping ears on the ship, okay?"

"Sure thing," said Farrell. "See you later."



By the time his shift was half over, Kirk felt totally drained. Pike had spent the entire time trying to catch him out by asking questions that most first officers would not be able to answer, nor would have any idea where to start looking for the information. Fortunately, Kirk had been through this sort of grilling before, so he automatically kept up with as much information as he could, no matter how trivial it appeared to be at the time.

Spock watched out of the corner of his eye at Kirk's competent handling of the computer and listened to the steady, quiet answers to questions that would by now have sent most men off the deep end.

"All right," came Pike's voice, "complete details of our upcoming mission."

Spock straightened up. The orders had been received that morning and the briefing had been completed only minutes before Kirk had come aboard. There was no way he would have had time to scan the orders. "We shall arrive at Cyros in seven point three days and are to investigate reports of scientific research that was unfamiliar to the patrolling scout ship."

Kirk flashed Spock a quick look of surprise and thanks. It was very rare in his experience to have someone bail him out of a difficult situation.

"I did not ask you..." began Pike hotly.

"As Science Officer I am in charge of the details of this particular mission," said Spock. "I would deem it interference if Commander Kirk had attempted to give you the answer. It is very obvious that he knows the guidelines of his position."

Pike looked from Spock to Kirk, then back again. It was rare for Spock to speak out on the bridge, although he was correct in this instance that he was the one who should be asked. Spock met his look squarely, but inwardly found he was surprised at what he had done. He dared not look at Kirk because he knew his surprise would show. He could conceal his feelings from Pike, but Kirk had shown a real sensitivity toward Spock and it was an opening Spock did not want to give him. It left him too vulnerable, and vulnerability was not something which insured lengthy survival.

"Very well, Science Officer, if you are so intent on being in sole charge of this mission, you have two hours to hand me a detailed report of what we shall find on Cyros and what you intend to do about it." Pike got to his feet. "The con is yours, Mr. Kirk. I trust the ship will not get lost in some interstellar dust cloud before I get back."

Kirk let out his breath as the turbolift doors closed behind Pike. He had been very close to losing his temper just before Spock had stepped in. He silently warned himself to be more careful in the future. Slowly he walked down to the command chair and sat down. For the first time in his life he was really in command of a starship. There was no one over him save the Captain, and when he was off the bridge, the first officer was it.

Spock watched as Kirk settled in that command chair and knew by the fleeting look of satisfaction just what Kirk was experiencing. He is a commander. It will not be long before a starship is his. Maybe Pike's fears will come to pass and it will be the Enterprise. He turned his attention to completing Pike's orders. It would be impossible to do it in two hours and he realized Pike knew that, but it would not stop the punishment that would come because of it.

"You're not making much progress," came a gruff voice at his elbow. Spock almost jumped. He had been so absorbed in his work that he had not noticed Kirk's approach. "I have the feeling what Pike asked for is going to be difficult for one man to accomplish in the time allotted, but maybe two could."

"A feeling?" asked Spock.

"Call it my famous sixth sense," replied Kirk. "Well, do you want help or not?" he demanded, obviously irritated at Spock's lack of quick acceptance.

"Spock, I am three steps away from the command chair. If the communications officer two steps away yells loudly enough, there's a good chance I'll hear her. Now, what are you doing?"

Spock felt a surge of relief run through him as he quickly explained to Kirk what had to be done. Although he was not afraid of any disciplinary action by Pike, it gave him perverse pleasure to be able to so neatly turn the tables on him. Kirk worked almost as quickly as the Vulcan on a subject with which he was totally unfamiliar, and was almost as accurate. After a short time Spock stopped watching him and put his full energy to his own work.

They finished in slightly under two hours, and Kirk was back in the command chair before Pike walked out of the turbolift. The Captain walked directly to Spock's station with a malicious smile on his face. He had just spent two hours devising the punishment for not completing the assignment on time.

"All right, let's see it."

Spock handed him the report. "I believe you will find it satisfactory, sir. The only item I omitted was the fact of you accompanying the landing party. As always, I do not presume your actions."

Pike looked at the report in his hand, anger suffusing his face. He knew better than to question Spock when the Vulcan said something would be satisfactory. He looked back at Spock, wondering how he had managed to complete the entire thing, unless somehow he had anticipated the order and had started the report that morning. "Pretty clever, Spock. This time you read me right. The next time it won't be quite so easy!" He turned and stomped to the command chair, tossing the report down the disposal chute without bothering to look at it.

Kirk had vacated the command chair as soon as the turbolift doors had opened, and was now back at his station to the right of Spock. He watched as Pike deposited the report, then threw a sympathetic look at Spock. The Vulcan was looking at Pike, and for a brief moment, Kirk saw hate in the depths of Spock's eyes.



"I've heard about your exploits on landing parties, Kirk," said Pike as they sat in the briefing room. "If I had my way, you'd never leave this ship, but I have to send an evaluation of your performance to Starfleet. I warn you, though, you take one step out of line and I'll nail you, is that understood?"

"Perfectly, sir."

Pike nodded. "We'll go in three groups. Commander Kirk will take an advance team and make sure everything is secure. Spock, you'll take your technicians and get every scrap of information you can wring out of those people.

I'll lead the security force. If anyone gets into trouble, holler for me. Any questions?"

There were none. As the others departed, Kirk hung back, then turned to Pike. "It is usual for a new officer to stay with the Captain in order to have a proper evaluation."

"Not with you," said Pike. "I don't want you anywhere near me. If this mission is successful, I'll assume you did your work in the efficient manner that befits your reputation and will report such."

"And if the mission is a failure?"

"I believe you know the punishment for that?"

Kirk nodded slowly. "Thank you, it's nice to know just exactly where I stand." He turned and walked out, meeting Farrell at the corridor junction. "I want only my people to beam down with me," he said quietly. "I don't care how you manage it, but I don't want any of Pike's men."

"Consider it done, sir," said Farrell. He gestured at another man standing nearby. "While I'm doing that, Dolby'll stay with you. He's completely trustworthy."



The shimmering heat hit them like a slap in the face as they materialized on the planet surface. Instantly weapons were at the ready and tricorders were working.

"It appears the complex we want is over in that direction," said Kirk. "Come on, we don't have much time to secure it before the science teams arrive."

Kirk's men were ruthless and efficient, and within a short time had the complex under their control. Kirk left guards at strategic places, then went exploring with Farrell. "A lot of people died in this takeover," he commented as they stepped over a pile of bodies in one of the corridors.

"None on our side," said Farrell. "They had no weapons of any power."

"No, no weapons," agreed Kirk, "but the power of their minds which can be weapon enough if put to the right use..." He broke off as he saw Spock coming down the corridor. "Sightseeing?" he asked with a grin as Spock walked up. "Pike will have your hide if he finds out."

Spock ignored the humor. "Three of my men have just disappeared, vanished into thin air."

Kirk looked at him, wondering if the Vulcan was putting him on, then decided he wasn't. As far as he knew, Vulcans never joked. "When?"

"A few minutes ago, just after Pike left."

"He's head of the security detail," said Kirk mildly. "I was ordered to take this complex, not to be responsible for what went on afterwards."

Spock looked at him. "Perhaps, but I suggest looking into the problem just the same."

"Is that a threat or a request?"

"Take it any way you choose," said Spock as he turned away. "Meanwhile, I have work to do."

Kirk watched him walk away, then turned to Farrell. "Well, Chief, we appear to have a mystery on our hands." His eyes narrowed. "Mysteries usually have a plausible answer. Collect the men, then start a thorough search."

"Just what are we searching for?"

"I'll know when we've found it. Keep in touch by communicator, subspace and scrambled. This might be nothing, or it might prove interesting. In either case, I don't want it general knowledge until I'm sure just what it is we're after."



Kirk quietly made his way down the narrow, stuffy corridor. He had found it quite by accident, and had not bothered to wait until one of the security force joined him. Sensing danger, he had his phaser drawn and set on kill.

The door at the end slid silently open at his approach. Inside were the usual computers, plus a small, greying man hunched over a viewscreen. He was totally absorbed in what he was watching and didn't hear Kirk approach. Kirk glanced at the screen and saw the picture was focused on Spock and his scientific team. Then the man centered the screen on one of the technicians and pressed a lever. The man disappeared from sight.

Kirk's eyebrows rose. This was a deadly weapon the little man was playing with. Deadly, but it could also be very useful if it fell into the right hands. "What are you doing?" he asked mildly.

The little man actually squeaked with terror as he whirled around. "Who are...how did you find me?"

"Unimportant," said Kirk coldly. "I hold the weapon. You are the one who answers."

"No," said the elderly man. "You'll find out nothing from me."

"Really?" said Kirk. He reset the phaser and took careful aim. The man yelped with pain as the ray of the phaser scorched the side of his head. "That will leave no permanent mark, but the next will cause mutilation. Now, what were you doing?"

The man was shaking like a leaf, but he shook his head. "No."

The phaser sounded again and the man crumpled to the ground, his leg charred. "I would suggest you tell me," said Kirk again. "I do not like people who make sneak attacks."

"You can say that?" cried the old man. "You who serve the Empire by suppression and terror."

The phaser struck again. "I'm still waiting," said Kirk.

Sobbing, the man broke down. "It's a Tantalus field."

"That's no help," said Kirk, lifting the phaser again.

"No, please, don't use it! The information you want is in the data banks."

Kirk nodded his thanks and moved to the computer. He whistled quietly as he read the requested information. It was complete. He would have no more use for the old man. Absently, he set his phaser back to kill, then took careful aim. Replacing it on his belt, he contacted Farrell. "I want you to send me your most trusted operative, one who had good knowledge and experience in the installation of unusual equipment."

"He's as good as on his way, sir," came Farrell's reply.

"Good. I'd also like you to go to Spock and tell him he should have no further problems. I'm going to be beaming up to the Enterprise for a short time. If Pike wants me for anything, don't tell him where I am, but contact me immediately. Understood?"

"No problem, sir," replied Farrell.



Skip O'Neill proved to be just what Kirk wanted. He was an older man and had had lots of experience dealing with alien equipment. Transferring the Tantalus field from the laboratory to Kirk's quarters caused no trouble, and he spent a long time reviewing the construction and operation of the device with Kirk.

"This is quite a find, sir," said O'Neill finally. "The man who holds this kind of power could be invincible." He checked the controls a final time. "Do you have any other questions about how it works?"

"No, you've been very clear in your explanation," said Kirk quietly, "unless there's something else you think I should know."

"I doubt it. Boy, there's a lot of people who'd give their eye teeth to have this. Keeping it a secret is going to be mighty difficult."

"I don't think so," said Kirk. "I'm not about to tell anyone, and you're not going to be in any position to try."

"What? I don't understand..." O'Neill froze in midturn as he saw the phaser aimed at him. "Now wait a minute, that's not nec..." His voice broke off as the killing ray enveloped him.

"Two of us knowing is one too many, O'Neill," said Kirk. His communicator beeped. "Kirk here."

"Farrell, sir. Pike's on his way to meet you. The transporter room already has the necessary coordinates."

"I'm on my way, Farrell. Thanks."

"Anytime. I'll be just outside if you should need me."



Kirk was poking around some machinery when Pike walked in. "I've just talked with your men. That was quite a display of force you showed."

"The Empire rules by fear. One should never miss the opportunity to establish that fear a little more deeply." He looked at Pike. "Any trouble on your end?"

"Spock lost some men when they fiddled with equipment they didn't understand. Other than that, it was a textbook exercise." He looked around. "I think we're about finished. You might as well get your men together and beam up. Spock and I can clean up."

Kirk nodded. "If you say so."

Pike watched him leave. He had deliberately sent too few men with Kirk, hoping it would cause him to fail or, better yet, to get killed, yet Kirk had managed to take the entire complex without one scratch to himself or to his men. "You are clever," Pike conceded, "and you have to luck of the devil behind you. But all men make mistakes, Kirk, and I'll be waiting when you make yours."



"Quarterly physicals," grumbled Boyce. "How much damned paperwork does Starfleet expect one man to do? He shook his head. "Well, at least now all that's left is the main bridge crew, then I'm finished." He finished his coffee, then looked at Kirk who was sitting across from him. "Since you're handy, Commander, why don't I start with you?"

"I haven't finished breakfast," said Kirk.

"Tough. Let's go, or do you want to be cited for insubordination?"

Kirk sighed, then pushed his breakfast away. "One day I'm going to command a ship where I can tell people like you to get the hell out of my life!"

"When you get command of a ship, sonny boy, you'll quickly discover you have no authority over your chief medical officer, and if you have any sense, you'll never test it."

Kirk followed Boyce into the Sickbay, then looked around. This was the first time he had been here. He avoided places like this, preferring to treat his own injuries whenever possible. He knew what went on in medical departments, and had never wanted to be an unwilling part of someone's experiment.

"Okay, strip off your clothes..." started Boyce.

"What do you mean 'strip'?" asked Kirk. "That's not a normal procedure for physicals."

"It is on this ship," said Boyce shortly. "You can either do it willingly, or I can have some orderlies in here who will do it for you, and enjoy it every step of the way!"

Kirk's face was burning with anger as he slowly undressed. He grew even redder when Boyce called in his nurses. He silently endured the testing, gritting his teeth as he fought his rising temper.

Finally Boyce seemed satisfied. "You're healthy, Kirk," he said as he stepped back from the diagnostic table, "and one hell of a specimen, I might add," he continued as he looked at Kirk appreciatively.

"This is one specimen you can forget about using as an experiment," said Kirk in an icy voice as he swung to his feet. "I'm planning to put you on report!"

"So ahead," said Boyce with a grin. "You won't be the first one who tried."

Spock walked in just as Kirk was pulling on his boots. His eyebrow rose a little as he noted the tense figure and angry face. It did not take much guessing as to what had happened.

"Oh, Spock, you're just in time. I've still got this table calibrated from doing your people. Lie down and let's get started."

"Lie down?" Kirk's head snapped up. "What about getting undressed first?"

"One does not need to disrobe for a physical," said Spock, mild reproval in his voice. As Kirk's face flushed scarlet, Spock knew his guess had been right. Boyce had pulled his old trick again as he did on most unsuspecting crewmembers. It would be interesting to see if this time something was done about it. Spock had a feeling that if anyone could manage it, it would be Kirk.



Several days later, as their duty shift ended, Kirk overheard Boyce asking Pike to come to his quarters after supper. Kirk found his curiosity stirring, so he skipped dinner and went to his quarters. He had not tried to use the Tantalus field since it had been installed. Viewing the meeting between Pike and Boyce would be a good initiation.

The holographs on the walls of Boyce's quarters caused Kirk's eyebrows to rise, and explained Boyce's little trick during the physical. Before he had time to reflect on it, the buzzer rang and Pike walked in.

"This place is disgusting, Phil," said Pike.

"Art is in the eye of the beholder," said Boyce mildly. "Sit down, Chris. I've got the martinis all ready."

Pike accepted the drink, then sat on the edge of the bed. "Okay, bartender, you've done your stuff. Now, what does the doctor have to say?"

"Am I that transparent?"

Pike nodded. "Especially when you have bad news."

Boyce nodded. "I'm afraid this time I do have bad news. One of the physicals didn't turn out too well."

"Oh, whose?"

"Yours."

Pike took a long swallow of his drink, then looked at Boyce. "Working too much and not enough play again, is that it?"

"No, Chris, this time it's serious..."

"How serious?"

"Terminal."

Pike looked at him with no change of expression. "You're not joking, are you?"

Boyce shook his head. "No. If you remember, I put you through twice. There's no mistake."

Pike got to his feet. "What is it?"

"Xenopolycythemia."

Pike nodded slowly. "How long?"

"I'm not sure. It's pretty advanced." He looked closely at Pike. "You're not surprised, are you? How long

have you been holding out on me?"

"I was going to say something, but I had to make sure everything was arranged before word got out. You know damn well I won't die from this. As soon as it's common knowledge, I'll be open game for everyone on board." He poured himself another drink. "If I go now, it'll just be another stepping stone for Kirk on his way to stardom."

Boyce shook his head. "I think you're reading him wrong, been listening to the scuttle about him. Have you ever taken the time just to sit back and watch him work?"

"I don't need to watch what I already know," said Pike bluntly. He looked at Boyce. "Will I be able to function normally?"

"For most of the time," said Boyce. "You'll slip at the end, of course. It's not the most pleasant way to go."

Kirk reached up and switched off the field, then went over to his desk and sat down, a little stunned by what he had heard. From the moment Wesley had told him he had been transferred to the Enterprise, he had been worried about Pike. He had known from the first that there would be a confrontation between them, a confrontation he would have to win. Suddenly that reality was gone, taken away by the shocking suddenness of life, and of death.

He glanced at the chronometer. It was late, but he knew he was too wound up to sleep. He got up and headed off for the officer's lounge. Maybe he could find something there to occupy his time.

When he walked in, the only person present was Spock, who was hunched in concentration over a chess board. Kirk watched him for a few minutes, then walked over. "Three-dimensional chess is more interesting," he said, gesturing to another table. "Don't you find the computer somewhat predictable as a chess partner?"

Spock looked up. "Is that an invitation, Commander?"

"No. A challenge."

Their eyes held for a moment, then Spock nodded. "I accept. Shall we?"

Kirk played chess in the same way as he approached everything in life, with a solid foundation of reasoning aided by sheer daring. Spock had never before met a Human who held his emotions so in check. Usually the men he played with would lose their tempers as the Vulcan's carefully laid plan beat them. Kirk met every trap and managed to put Spock on the defensive with each move, finally forcing one of the few times Spock had been forced to concede.

"Bullseye," said Kirk with a challenging smile.

"I believe the correct terminology is checkmate," said Spock as he studied the board, trying to figure out how Kirk had managed to back him so neatly into a corner.

"You play your game, Spock, and I'll play mine."

Spock looked at him. "Chess is not necessarily a game."

"I agree," said Kirk quietly, the smile leaving his face. "I asked you once before about loyalty, Spock..."

"My answer has not changed."

"I didn't expect it to, but what if circumstances changed. What then?"

"That is speculation, Commander, and Vulcans do not speculate. We go by facts and logic."

"Facts and logic. Fair enough," said Kirk. He got to his feet. "Well, I think it's time for some sleep. Thanks for the game. I needed to unwind a bit."

Spock watched him leave, puzzlement showing in his eyes. Conversations with Humans were usually direct, but Kirk had hidden layers of subtlety that Spock had never met before, and he was not sure how to deal with them.



"Where's that damned Vulcan?"

Kirk looked up at Pike's voice, then looked around the bridge, noticing for the first time that Spock wasn't there. It was most unusual for the Vulcan to be late for duty. He glanced back at Pike. Several weeks had passed since he had overheard the conversation between Pike and Boyce. Since then he had been carefully watching his commanding officer, looking for any sign of weakness caused by the disease, but so far he had seen none. Finally, he turned back to his work. Spock's whereabouts were of no concern to him.

"Captain," came Uhura's voice, "Doctor Boyce wants to know where the reports are you said you were sending him this morning."

"Tell him I've lost my stupid messenger boy!" snapped Pike. "No, wait," he said before Uhura could turn back to her console. "Kirk, you're sitting around doing nothing. Here..." Kirk looked up in time to see two tapes hurtling across the bridge at him. He managed to react in time to knock them to the floor before they hit him in the head. "Take those to Boyce, then get your ass back here, or you'll get handed the same treatment Spock's going to get if he ever decides to get his lazy carcass onto the bridge!"

Kirk bent down and picked up the tapes, pressing the silent buzzer to warn Farrell that he was going to need his services. He looked at Pike for a few seconds, his eyes imparting a message far more clearly than words ever

would. Pike was pushing too hard, and he would take very little more. He knew by Pike's smile that his message was read.

Farrell was waiting as the turbolift doors opened. "Trouble?"

"Not yet, but Pike's about ready to strike. Be careful, Chief. He wants me, but he knows he'll have to go through you to do it."

"Don't worry," said Farrell, "it's been tried before, and we're both still here." He suddenly stopped, his head cocked to one side. "Something's happening ahead," he said quietly. He pulled out his phaser as Kirk slipped the knife from his belt. Together they moved forward silently.

Kirk almost fell over the body lying in the shadows. Farrell caught him, then dropped to his knees. "A Vulcan," he whispered, "one of Spock's operatives." He looked up as scuffling sounded in the corridor ahead of them.

"Come on," said Kirk, touching his shoulder.

Spock had fought as well as he could, but there were too many of them and, alone, he had been overpowered. Three men were holding him while a fourth was methodically beating him with a chain. Blood was running down his face and he was on his feet only because his attackers had not released their hold. He saw a shadowy movement in the corridor and looked up, hope filling him as he saw Kirk standing there. He bunched his muscles for one final struggle, when he saw the Human replace the knife in his belt and lean against the wall, arms folded. It was obvious he was going to do nothing to help.

The chain came down again, and this time Spock's legs gave completely. They let go of him and he crumpled to the floor. As they turned to watch him fall, they saw Kirk.

"Passing the time of day, gentlemen?" he asked mildly. He looked down at Spock. "I've heard Vulcans aren't very good at crawling. How about it, Vulcan? Can you drag yourself on your stomach?"

Spock's hands were clenched into fists. He knew if he tried to answer he would be unable to stop the cry of pain that was held in his throat. A heavy boot thudded into his side.

"You were asked a question by a superior officer. You'd better answer."

Spock could do nothing to hide the agony. "I do not crawl before anybody, especially Humans," he gasped. Suddenly someone grabbed his hair and the chain was pulled tight between his legs, as they started to haul him forward. The cry was forced from him as red-hot pain filled his being.

"Crawl, Vulcan!"

"Yes, crawl," came Kirk's laughing voice, "or do you consider this just another game?"

Spock's fuzzy mind suddenly cleared. Game? He managed to raise his head and look at Kirk. The Human was still leaning against the wall, but Spock saw his hand was poised over his knife. A game - invitation or challenge - an invitation to easy death, or a challenge to live? Weakly, Spock moved his arms. The distance seemed impossible for his battered body, but he would not lie down and die if there was a chance for life.

Kirk's taunts gave him the strength to keep going. Blazing anger added to agonizing pain made it possible to drag himself down the corridor, leaving a trail of green blood as he went. As he reached Kirk, a smashing foot caught him on the side of the head and he knew nothing else.



"The tapes are delivered," said Kirk as he stepped onto the bridge. "Doctor Boyce said he would contact you later."

"Where's Spock?"

"Sir?"

"I asked you a question, Kirk."

"I do not recall that you asked me to look for him," said Kirk mildly. "However, if you cannot control the actions of your officers, I suggest that perhaps it's time for a change of career."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Kirk? If I was out of the way, the Enterprise would be yours."

Kirk looked around the bridge. All eyes and ears were on the two of them. "I hardly think this is the time or place to discuss personnel reassessments. If you'll excuse me, I have work to do, even if you haven't." Without waiting for dismissal, Kirk turned and walked off the bridge.



Kirk tapped twice on the door to Spock's quarters and it slid open. He quickly moved inside and it shut behind him. Spock was lying on the bed, still unconscious. A medical orderly was working on him under the careful watch of Farrell's phaser.

"How is he?"

"Badly injured, but he'll make it," replied the orderly.

"He's got to do more than make it, he's got to get to the bridge or Pike will really do him in."

"Look, I'm no superman..."

"Obviously. Farrell, escort our medical friend outside, would you?" He nodded slightly, sealing the man's death. As the doors closed, he turned back to Spock. He soaked a cloth in cold water and wiped the blood from Spock's face, then slapped him lightly. "Come on, Spock, get with it. No time for sleeping..."

Applications of cold water and stinging slapping finally brought the Vulcan to consciousness. He lay looking at Kirk for a minute, slowly absorbing the fact that he was not dead. "Why?" he asked finally.

"Your attackers were Pike's operatives. Opposing Pike in any way I can suits my purpose. He wants you dead and, at the moment, I don't."

"So I am alive simply because it suits your purpose," said Spock, remembering Kirk's words in the corridor and realizing he had misinterpreted them. He looked away. "Then there is no reason to thank you."

Kirk put the cloth down on the ledge beside the bed. "There is little reason ever to thank anyone, Spock. You owe me nothing, just as you owe Pike nothing."

"He saved my life."

"And so have I."

Spock remained silent. Kirk stood and looked around Spock's quarters for the first time. "I don't know very much about Vulcans. From the artifacts, I would say you admire warriors."

"They are part of my family's heritage."

"Vulcans are rare in the service. What made you join?"

Spock pushed himself to a sitting position, wincing as the pain shot through him. "I am sure you have heard the rumors."

"I don't listen to rumors. They rarely tell the truth."

Spock sighed. "I did not like the viciousness of the Vulcan people, so I left."

Kirk smiled slightly. "You consider this life to be any less vicious?"

"Commander," said Spock softly, "I have read your background. You came from Terra. You grew up among the treachery of your race, but you were one of them so you learned from it, and survived. I grew up on Vulcan. In order to survive, I had to leave."

"I don't understand."

Spock glanced up at him. "You saw what happened in the corridor. More than that, you heard." He studied his hands. "A Vulcan does not cry out in pain no matter what the cause."

"But you..."

"I am not a full Vulcan, Kirk." He saw the hazel eyes fixed on him.

"That's a well-kept secret. How did you manage it?"

"It is nothing to be proud of. I was an experiment, one of thousands, and the only one that worked. Those that created me hate me for being genetically flawed, even though they can point with pride at being successful in their work."

"Bastards," said Kirk.

Surprise flickered in Spock's eyes. "In Starfleet I am hated, but I am also feared. Here I can live a semblance of a life. On Vulcan, I could not."

"Are you always this open to questioning, Spock?"

"Once before, years ago, to Pike."

"He's trying to kill you now. Your power is starting to rival his. Is that what loyalty means to you?"

"I remain true to my own values. Some day it is more likely you will try to do the same, try to eliminate me."

"Are you sure?"

"I have watched you, Kirk. A number of people have died since you came aboard the Enterprise. However, in your favor, you rarely assign others to kill for you."

"I have never killed without reason." Suddenly it was important to him that Spock should believe that.

"Reason for one man may not be reason for another."

"We can only see life from our own point of view," said Kirk sharply. He picked up a hypo. "Come on, let's do something for that pain, then get you cleaned up a bit." He saw Spock tense. "Don't worry, it's from my own stuff. I don't trust the medical department any more than you do, but I had to have someone with some training evaluate just how badly hurt you really were. Once you're fixed up, we'd better get to the bridge before Pike decides to eliminate both of us on the spot."

When they got to the bridge, Kirk carefully watched Pike's reaction, and he wasn't disappointed. Spock was supposed to be dead and he wasn't. Pike glared at Kirk, his message clear. Kirk had signed his own death warrant

by helping the Vulcan. It was only a matter of time.



It was weeks before Spock had fully healed. During that time Kirk cared for him, treated his wounds and made sure he ate properly until he was healthy enough to do it for himself, and strong enough to once again take on full duties without exhausting himself.

"Spock, I need all data concerning recent events on Gorla." Pike slipped a tape out of the viewer and tossed it over to Kirk. "I want your analysis, Mister, and a plan of action." He got to his feet. Kirk detected a slight paling of Pike's face as he moved.

"Permission to do so in my quarters?" he asked.

"You can do it floating around in space for all I care," retorted Pike. Kirk nodded and left the bridge quickly. He knew where Pike would be going and wanted to get to the Tantalus field as fast as he could.

"Phil..." Pike almost collapsed as he entered Sickbay.

"What the blue devil?" Boyce caught the staggering man. "How many times have I told you to lay off the liquor before lunch?" He gestured to his nurses to get out, then helped Pike onto one of the diagnostic beds.

"Hurts," said Pike.

Boyce checked the readout. "Red corpuscle count has skyrocketed. We're in big trouble." He gave Pike a couple of injections, then stood back and watched as the indicators returned to more normal readings. "That was close," he said. "When did it start?"

"Last night."

"Last night! Why the hell didn't you call me?"

"I tried. They told me you were busy! Phil, we've got an important mission coming up. There's a lot of unrest on Gorla, and Starfleet wants us in there to calm it down."

"You don't have to be on your feet to do that. Flatten the planet, for pete's sake!"

"Can't. Starfleet wants an evaluation of the situation before any action is taken. You can't make up an evaluation, Phil, and on something as important as this, I've got to go."

"Chris, this whole damn ship is full of capable people. Let them earn their stripes."

Pike smiled, but there was no amusement in it. "Like Kirk?"

"Will you stop being so paranoid and face reality?" said Boyce. "You're dying, and there's not a damned thing anyone can do about it! After you're dead, it's almost a hundred percent certainty that Kirk will get this ship..."

"No," broke in Pike quietly. "Kirk will never have the Enterprise. He's going to die along with me."

Kirk snapped off the Tantalus field, feeling a chill run down his spine at Pike's words. There had been no threat in the man's voice, he had merely stated a fact as certain as his own death. He turned and walked over to his desk, picking up the tape he had dropped there when he first entered. He would have to kill Pike, that was clear, but he would have to do it very carefully. The loyalty of Pike's operatives was legendary, and the man's death would be avenged.



Pike, along with Kirk, Spock, and Boyce, accompanied by a small security detail, beamed down to Gorla. They were dressed in the form-fitting gold-flecked outfits favored by the Gorlan race. When Kirk had first walked into the transporter room with Farrell, all eyes locked on him. There was no other way to describe it, the man was stunning.

Now they were standing in a little traveled back street of the main city. Their job here was not with the leaders, but with the rebels. They had become a real power over the past months and were threatening to topple the existing puppet government. They had to be stamped out and it would have to be done quickly. Gorla was too valuable a supplier of dilithium crystals to be allowed to break away from the Empire.

It was early evening on Gorla, and the lights were starting to come on as the men made their way toward one of the major thoroughfares.

"Intelligence states we can make contact with the rebels at the Torquay Inn," said Pike. "Since we managed to miss dinner, maybe we should make that our first stop anyway. Perhaps we'll be able to kill two birds with one stone."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other, both putting a different interpretation on what Pike had said. "Well, I can always eat," said Kirk. "Lead on, oh fearless leader, while you can." Pike shot a look at him, but Kirk's face was complete innocence.

The Torquay Inn was a quiet, cozy place. Pannet moss crackled merrily in an open flame, sending a soft blue smoke throughout the building, with its sweet scent just touching the air. The security men spread out as they entered, while the four of them were seated at a table.

"I need a drink," said Pike.

"Sounds good to me," said Kirk, uncomfortably aware that Boyce had been staring at him almost non-stop since he had arrived in the transporter room.

"A waste of money," commented Spock.

"Bull," retorted Boyce. "Just because your screwy system can't absorb the stuff doesn't mean you should condemn the rest of us to sobriety."

"Why is it, Doctor," asked Spock, "that all members of the medical profession in this Empire are drunks?"

Boyce glared at him, then turned to Pike. "A Rigel Nog for you, Chris?"

Spock stared at him. Rigel Nog was nonalcoholic and Pike was a very heavy drinker. He waited for the inevitable explosion from the Captain, but it didn't come.

"Rigel Nog it is. Care to join me, Spock?"

Spock had to pull himself together in order to hide his surprise. "I do not favor the drink, Captain."

"Yuck," said Kirk, voicing his thoughts on their selection. "Think I'll have an Omicron Rebel."

Boyce grinned. "I'll put you to bed after that one, Commander."

"I'll just bet you'd like to try," said Kirk coldly. Boyce just grinned as Farrell came up and whispered something to Kirk. Kirk nodded, then got to his feet. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen."

"We don't separate," said Pike coldly, but Kirk didn't even glance at him as he turned to follow Farrell. "Damn him!" said Pike, watching Kirk's retreating figure.

"Commander Kirk almost always works alone," said Spock mildly, "and if you read his record, he is usually successful."

Boyce put a hand on Pike's arm. "Let him go, Chris. Maybe by doing so you'll get rid of one of your problems."



Kirk returned to the Inn just as the others were finishing their dinner. "It's all set," he said as he slid back into his seat.

"What's all set?" asked Pike, his anger at Kirk's insubordination still hot.

"Your meeting with the rebel leaders. That is what you came to Gorla for, isn't it?"

"But how...?"

Kirk's eyes darkened. "Pike, my methods of operation are my business, not yours. You appeared to have no plan of action when we beamed down and I, for one, do not like to wander around aimlessly waiting for luck to hit me over the head."

"Random chance," said Spock. Kirk's glance flicked over at him. "Luck is not tangible," he added. Kirk's eyes cleared and, although no smile touched his face, Spock knew Kirk was pleased with this small show of support.

Kirk turned his attention back to Pike. "If you have sufficiently wined and dined yourself, I would suggest you turn your attention to the matter at hand. The rebels are a nervous lot. Make them wait and they are very likely not to be there at all."

"You mean we might spoil your latest spectacular deed," sneered Pike.

"Captain," said Spock, "if Commander Kirk has indeed set up a meeting with the rebels and you are the cause of its failing, you will be put on report. I very much doubt if Starfleet Command would be pleased at such an action."

"Are you siding with him, Spock? Remember what you owe me..."

"I owe you nothing," interrupted Spock in a vicious tone. "My own warped sense of duty made me think I did, but I now know otherwise. My allegiance to you is as my commanding officer and as long as you give me no reason to question your actions or make me compromise mine, I shall follow you with as much loyalty as the next man. But if you fail..."

"Trouble," broke in Boyce quietly. He had been following the argument with real enjoyment, but was not caught up in the heated anger. He was the only one who had seen the armed men enter and almost immediately zero in on where they were sitting. Kirk spun around, only to be grabbed and held in a vicious aralock.

"Watch the Vulcan," ordered the leader. "He's stronger than any of us." Spock sat quietly, noting the phaser aimed at him was set to kill.

"So this is your brilliant plan, is it?" asked Pike as he was hauled to his feet. "You've made a big blunder this time, Kirk, and you're going to pay for it!"



The commandant stood looking at the four of them, contempt showing in his eyes. "That is the most fantastic lie I have heard in my many years of interrogation." He walked forward until he was facing Pike. "You claim to be a Starfleet commander, and these are your men..." He slowly walked down the line, finally stopping in front of Spock. "Vulcans do not serve under Humans..." He glanced back at Pike, "but they would side with rebels against

the Empire." He called out and another man came in. "Well?"

"The interrogation of the other is complete. They are rebels."

"Like hell we are..." started Pike.

"We followed this man," interrupted the commandant, jabbing at Kirk, "and he went right to a rebel stronghold." He suddenly reached forward and grabbed Kirk by the hair, wrenching him down so he was kneeling on the floor. "You suffer silently," he said approvingly, his eyes not flinching from the hate in Kirk's face. Without releasing his hold on Kirk, he suddenly lashed out and Pike collapsed on the floor, unable to stop the cry of pain. "You are no leader," continued the commandant, "you cry out with little reason, and he was the one who went to the rebels." He turned back to Kirk. "I think I shall discover what you are plotting." He threw him to the floor. "Bring him," he said to the guards. "Take the others to the cell with their comrades. They can discuss what happens to enemies of the Empire."



"How long?" Pike asked. He lay on the dank straw in the gloomy cell.

"Five hours, twenty-seven minutes," replied Spock.

"He's probably told them all he knows about everything," said Pike with a laugh. He looked over at the six men sitting across the cell from them. There had been seven, but one had died a few minutes earlier, the one who had been interrogated by the Gorlan officials.

"Someone's coming," said Spock quietly. A light appeared as the door opened briefly, then was cut off after something was thrown in.

"My God!" said Boyce. He was used to the methods used in Starfleet, but they didn't even begin to approach what had been done to the man lying in front of them. Pike stood stunned. Spock drew his mental barriers tight so no emotion could cloud his thinking.

"Tanken, help me!" Two of the rebels moved forward. They carefully lifted Kirk onto a pile of straw.

"I didn't talk," Kirk gasped. "They learned nothing..."

"Hush," said one of the rebels, "don't try to talk."

"They'll come...back for me. Just wanted...to show..." Suddenly his hands dug deeply into the straw as the pain took control.

Spock moved forward, brushing the rebels aside. "I can help him..."

"Don't you dare touch him, Spock. Consider that an order!"

Spock didn't even look at Pike. He reached out and carefully turned Kirk over onto his back. Deep, ugly wounds covered Kirk's upper body. Spock was impressed by the control Kirk still maintained, considering the obvious agony he was suffering. He carefully placed his fingers on Kirk's face, feeling for the entry points, then opened his mind and accepted the pain.



Kirk regained consciousness slowly, reluctant to leave the black nothingness to face the pain of reality, but he could do nothing to prevent it.

He was lying in deep grass at the edge of a thick woods. Pike and Boyce were standing a few feet away, and Spock was nowhere in sight. Kirk slowly pushed himself to a sitting position, almost passing out again as pain shot through him. The movement caused the two men to turn.

"Hoped you were dead," said Pike mildly.

"Don't you wish," said Kirk through gritted teeth. Boyce walked over and knelt beside him. Kirk tried to push him away, but was too weak to make any impression. "Leave me alone, I don't want your dirty hands touching me!"

Boyce shoved back and Kirk slumped to the ground, his face paling. "I've just about had it with your high and mighty attitude, sonny. I can do damn well what I please with you and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it."

"Perhaps not," came a quiet voice from behind them, "but I suggest you do not try to carry out that threat."

Boyce looked up at Spock's voice, then got to his feet, carelessly kicking Kirk as he did so. "I've had enough of your superior attitude as well, Vulcan."

"May I say I also have not much enjoyed our association."

"Then why don't you get out of here? This Human can't be of any importance to you. You've said often enough that we're inferior."

Spock nodded, eyes never leaving Boyce's face. "That is true, and it holds I also don't like to see an inferior tortured, especially when he is helpless."

"You call someone like Kirk helpless?"

Spock glanced down. The hazel eyes were puzzled, causing Spock to smile. "No, not any longer." He suddenly

jumped forward, knocking Boyce flat on his back. As he leapt across Kirk, a phaser dropped from his belt.

Kirk didn't wait to discover if it had fallen accidentally, or if Spock had deliberately dropped it. He was on his feet in an instant, ready to help the Vulcan, but it was over. A loud crack told of Tal-Shaya. The association had ended.

"Why you..."

"Hold it right there, Pike," said Kirk coldly. "Your fight isn't with him."

Pike stopped and looked at Kirk. "What fight?"

"You said it yourself, you won't die a natural death."

"What? Where did you hear that?"

"You're going to die," said Kirk with a cruel smile, "but not the way you planned it. I'm not going to die with you."

Pike's face paled. "How did you know?"

"Does it matter? You've lost, Pike. You've lost everything, including your ship. I'm going to get it."

"I'll get you..."

Kirk shook his head. "You have two choices. Die here, painlessly, or face what awaits you back on the ship. You almost managed to disrupt this mission, your one friend is lying there dead and you will surely die, in slow agony, with no help, no comfort..."

Spock looked at Kirk, wondering what the Human was talking about.

"Why, Kirk?" asked Pike.

"For reasons you'd never understand."

"Assassinate your commanding officer, eh? Add to your laurels?"

"You've got it," said Kirk, a smile crossing his face. His hand moved on the phaser as his vision started to fade.

Spock caught him before he fell. "The rebel ship is here. I suggest we leave." Kirk nodded, too weak to be able to say anything, and thankful that Spock didn't ask any questions. He knew he couldn't come up with a clear answer.



The light breeze blew Kirk's hair forward as he stood leaning heavily against Spock's supporting arm. He hurt more than he thought it possible to hurt, but not nearly as much as he had before the Vulcan had reached out to help.

"Your information concerning the Gorlan defenses is invaluable, James. I don't know how we can thank you."

Kirk looked at the rebel leader. "I despise the Empire as much as you. I try to be useful whenever I can."

"Yet you will not stay," said Logor. "Here on our planet you are safe from the Gorlan authorities, safe from Starfleet. You were badly injured, almost killed in our cause. We cannot allow that to go unrewarded."

"Your thanks is reward enough," said Kirk. "I will not just disappear from your life, Logor. Perhaps I will give you even more cause to remember me."

Logor smiled. "How can there be more? You came at a time when we desperately needed help. Your men managed to get you out of that hell hole from which there is no escape with the loss of but one of our men from their torture. I am very sorry two of your companions died, however. Such brave men, all of you..."

Spock felt Kirk shift his weight and carefully slipped an arm around his waist. Logor didn't know that Farrell had simply waited the prescribed length of time that had been arranged with the commandant, then had the Enterprise beam all of them out. "Sir," he said, "with all due respect, I feel it would be wise to get on our way so James can receive medical treatment..."

"But of course!" said Logor, getting to his feet. "I shall be looking forward to hearing from you again, James."

Kirk nodded. "I shall return as soon as I can." Spock helped him to the small, unmarked shuttle and, as soon as the doors shut, Kirk collapsed in the Vulcan's arms. "It's up to you," he said weakly as Spock laid him on the floor. He looked up at the Vulcan, then blackness rose up to claim him.



"The orders are now officially in from Starfleet," said Spock as he carefully checked Kirk's healing injuries. "Komack has given you the Enterprise."

"A foregone conclusion, wasn't it?" asked Kirk.

"In most people's eyes, yes."

"But not in yours."

"Most did not understand the battle you fought with Pike. None knew why he had to die."

"He was going to kill me if I didn't kill him first."

Spock looked at him as he put the hypo down. "No one will kill you, Kirk. There are no vulnerable areas, no way anyone can breach your defenses."

"Anyone can be killed, Spock."

"Perhaps, but there are different deaths and different ways to die."

"What are you getting at?"

"Xenopolycythemia."

Kirk sat staring at Spock for a long time, then swung to his feet. "The rebel base will have to be destroyed if Gorla is to have a stable government."

"You almost died to achieve their trust."

"There was no other way in so short a time. They are a strong, dangerous force opposing the Empire and they must be crushed." He turned to look at Spock. "Do you agree?"

Spock returned his look. "This is what you meant when you told Logor that you would give him even more cause to remember you?"

Kirk nodded. "I take it you disapprove?"

"No, we serve the Empire. Rebellion cannot be tolerated."

Kirk came back across the room and stood in front of the Vulcan. "You saved my life. All this could have been yours."

Spock rose to his feet. "You saved my life once."

"And I told you then you owed me nothing."

"Now I owe you nothing," said Spock softly.

"Good." Kirk grinned. "Since you don't owe me anything, I need a first officer."

Spock confronted him. He had known Kirk but for a few short months, yet in that time he had shared more with him than he had with any other man. They had faced death together from many sides, shared the hottest of fires that came with that reality and, for the first time in his life, Spock found he was coming to respect a Human, the man standing in front of him. Kirk was a contradiction, ambitious, quick both to anger and to kill, but at the most unexpected moments he would show a depth of compassion Spock would have sworn did not exist under the hard exterior. More than that, Kirk had met every challenge offered by the Vulcan. It was very possible in the future that the man would change, become too ruthless, too dangerous, but for now Spock was content to serve with him, to be with him.

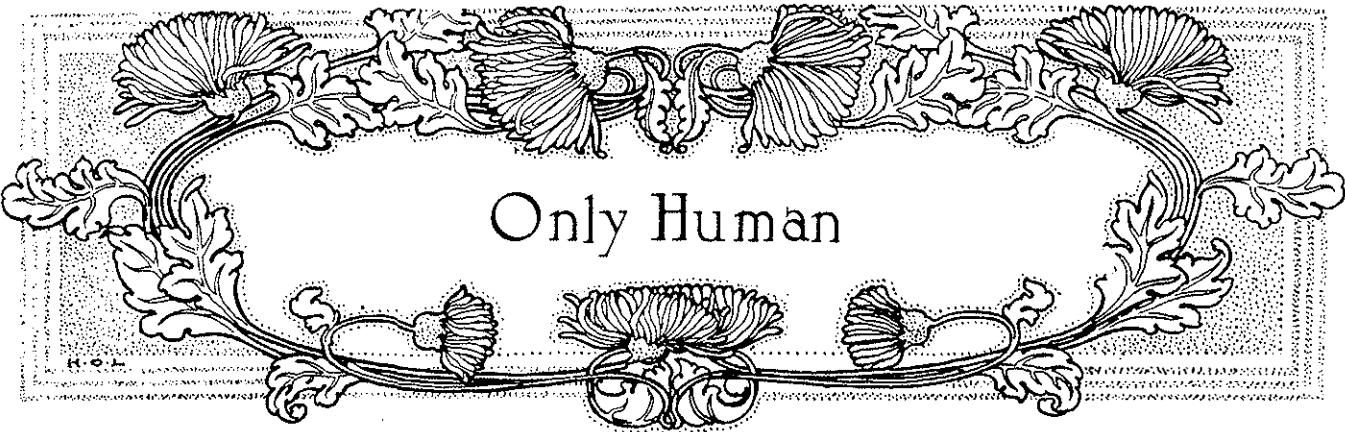
"I have never desired command, Captain," he said quietly, "but if you feel I could serve you in that position, I would be willing to try."

Kirk nodded. "I suspected you'd say something like that. You've already received your promotion, Commander."

Spock bowed his head. "Then may I suggest we set in motion your plan for the rebel base? It will solve Gorla's problem and will no doubt add additional luster to your already celebrated career."

"I see we will indeed work well together," Kirk smiled. "Shall we go?"





Only Human

"One entire month of leave - to be spent on Earth - effective immediately."

Jim Kirk sat quietly across from the admiral. His face was drawn and pale, the result of a very demanding debriefing from the last mission. His eyes were slightly glazed, his attention obviously somewhere else. His mind was reliving the last mission as it had so often the past few days. He should have ignored the orders from Starbase 6 - he knew the minute he gave the order to enter the zone of darkness he was wrong. But he was too stubborn to admit it. He had endangered every life under his command - he had almost killed his best friend. He crippled the *Enterprise* getting her out of a situation she never should have been in. And this wasn't the first bad decision - the deaths on Gamma Triangula VI were caused because he dropped his guard and was enjoying himself. How many more mistakes would they allow him to make before they took any action? How many more would he allow himself to make - how many more lives were to be lost because of him?

"Jim, didn't you hear me? I said an entire month's leave - on Earth."

Kirk came back to reality. He had heard West's statement and knew he should be pleased with the order but felt nothing but an emptiness. McCoy looked at him, growing concern clouding his normally clear blue eyes.

"Come on, Jim, let's go."

Looking across at McCoy, he nodded and got to his feet.

"Thank you very much, sir," he said.

As they started to leave, the admiral asked McCoy to stay a moment longer. "Doctor, how badly is Kirk injured? I have never seen him so down."

"There is nothing physical that won't heal, sir, but he is exhausted, mentally as well as physically. These last few months have taken their toll. All the crew need rest leave. I have been recommending it for some time now but, as usual, nothing has been done about it. Someone seems to feel the *Enterprise* is the only starship in the Fleet - not just one of twelve!"

"Reprimand noted, Doctor. It shall be as you ask. As of this date the crew is on leave. The *Enterprise* needs extensive repairs to her engines and will be out of commission for at least a month. Perhaps it would be just as well if her crew was treated the same way."

"Thank you, sir."

McCoy left the admiral's office with a satisfied smile. Noticing Kirk was not in the waiting area, he headed back to the living quarters. Knocking on the captain's door, he got no answer. Worried, he went across the hall to Spock's room. The Vulcan answered almost immediately, motioning McCoy to come in but to be quiet. Kirk was asleep on the couch.

"He said he wanted to play chess but fell asleep, Doctor. He seemed upset..."

"He just needs a break, Spock," interrupted McCoy. "We humans do not have your Vulcan stamina. He has hit the limits of his endurance, whether he'll admit it or not. But one good piece of news - the *Enterprise* is going to take some time for the repair work. We are all on leave until such time as the repairs are completed - effective now. Georgia - here I come!"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "The entire crew, that is a precedent."

"Come to Earth, Spock. You would like it."

"Thank you, Doctor, but I believe I would rather go to Vulcan. There is a symposium being conducted at the Science Academy which I would like to attend since I am free."

McCoy chuckled. "You and Scotty. I cringe to think what would happen if you were forced to take up knitting or something."

"Doctor, why would I take up such an occupation? I see no logical use for such a skill. Doubtless a computerized production line would more readily..."

"Skip it - it was just a thought. Well, if I don't see you before you go, enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, Doctor. May I extend the same wish to you."



Within a few days, the *Enterprise* crew was scattered across the galaxy, some heading home, others for a period of pure fun, and a surprising number for continued studies on different planets.

Jim Kirk was alone in a turbolift, out of uniform - on his way down to the transporter area. He was going to Earth aboard the *Stanley Dark*, passenger ship. He was about halfway to his destination when he was joined by two Starfleet officers somewhat younger than he was.

"Level 6, my good man," ordered the taller of the two. "I am in somewhat of a hurry."

Kirk opened his mouth to protest his treatment at the hands of a lieutenant but the humor of the situation got to him and all he said was, "Yes, sir, level 6."

The two men were discussing the *Enterprise* and the daring rescue she had just accomplished.

"I have never met this fellow Kirk, but he must be quite something," said the shorter one. "Rarely have I heard Commander Starret say anything good about anyone, but he can't say enough about that one. Did you know Kirk was only 32 when he became a starship captain? Most men don't rise that high until they're at least 40! I've talked to some of his crew - not one had anything but admiration for him. Any other captain has at least one enemy somewhere. I sure wouldn't mind serving aboard his ship."

"Not me," returned the taller lieutenant. "He sounds too much like a goody-goody. At least give me someone with..."

He was interrupted by a strangled cough from the elevator operator. Then the turbolift came to a halt and McCoy got on board accompanied by Commodore Wesley.

"Well, Jim, I hear you are leaving us for awhile."

"Uh, yes," mumbled Kirk, not wanting to expose his identity to the two passengers who had been discussing him so freely.

"Do you good - find out how the other half lives." Then becoming serious as the turbolift arrived at the transporter level, he said, "I don't know how you managed to stop that spacegoing amoeba after it destroyed both the Gamma 7A system and the *Intrepid*. That was quite a report you handed in."

A dim understanding of who they had been sharing the turbolift with was showing on the faces of the two lieutenants.

"It sounds more spectacular than it actually was, Bob. Ready, Bones?" This last was addressed to McCoy who seemed puzzled by the reaction of the two young men opposite him - they were turning a deep red.

"I suppose so, Jim." Shrugging his shoulders and reminding himself that he was on leave, he followed Kirk out of the turbolift. The doors closed and Bob Wesley and the younger men continued on their journey.

Summing up his courage, the taller of the two tapped Wesley on the shoulder. "Excuse me, sir, but did you know that man who just left?"

"Of course," answered Wesley, "that was Captain James T. Kirk of the *Enterprise*."

The lieutenants exchanged horrified glances.



Kirk was relating the incident to McCoy as they waited to beam aboard the *Stanley Dark*.

"Serves you right for keeping your mouth shut," said McCoy, "and for looking too haggard to be anything but an ordinary elevator operator."

They beamed aboard the ship and McCoy quickly steered Kirk to the Sickbay. The latter protested mightily but was overruled by his friend. "Look, Jim - it will take two weeks to get to Earth. If you stay here quietly you may be in good enough shape to enjoy your leave. If you don't, you might end up in a hospital on Earth and that doesn't sound too appealing to me." Kirk was too tired to argue for long and allowed himself to be bundled into bed. McCoy had a long talk with the ship's doctor, then went off to find his own quarters.

The journey to Earth passed uneventfully. Jim Kirk slowly healed and his color returned, but McCoy grew more concerned about him as they approached their destination. His captain was deeply depressed and no amount of effort on the doctor's part seemed to help. The captain was reluctant to talk about anything but the most trivial matters. When he was with Kirk, as he was daily, the captain made an effort to be cheerful, but McCoy could see his heart wasn't in it.

"What are you going to do when we get home, Jim?" McCoy asked him one day. They were sitting in a large observation deck watching the tiny dot that was Earth looming ever larger as the *Stanley Dark* warped toward her

destination.

"I don't know, Bones. Haven't given it much thought. Go find a warm beach somewhere - sleep in the sun. Maybe go home for a visit. What are you planning on doing?"

"I am heading straight for Georgia - mint juleps, southern belles! Why don't you come along, you'd like it."

"No thanks, I like the sound of my quiet beach better."

"All right, but you are passing up one of the best shore leaves you may ever have."

A few hours later, they parted company, McCoy heading for his beloved south and Kirk, after some indecision, heading home.



Sitting in the ante-room of Peter West's office, Commander Spock was concerned. He had received an urgent summons from West a few weeks after he had arrived on Vulcan. There was no explanation, just a request that he present himself as soon as possible at the admiral's office at Starfleet Headquarters. He knew the matter concerned his captain - Jim Kirk had been almost a stranger when he had said goodbye.

"Admiral West can see you now, sir."

Spock brought his attention back to the room. As preoccupied as he had been, he had noticed the attractive lieutenant come from West's office.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said as he stood up.

She watched him walk across the room, the deep tone of his voice still sounding in her ears. She had heard of Commander Spock - there were many stories told throughout Starfleet Command about the Vulcan. He was much better looking than she had imagined he would be, and moved with a grace that was absent in any other man she had known. Sighing quietly to herself, she returned to her work.

"Come in, Mr. Spock. I appreciate you coming so quickly."

"Your message underlined the need for haste, Admiral."

"Yes, I suppose it did." West hesitated for a moment, not knowing how to put into words the reason for summoning the Vulcan. Finally, he blurted out, "Mr. Spock, have you heard from Captain Kirk since you went on leave?"

Keeping his face carefully neutral, not letting the tightening feeling in his stomach sound in his voice, he replied, "No, sir. I have been somewhat involved with a symposium at the Vulcan Science Academy. I presume the captain is on Earth pursuing his leave in his own fashion."

"Yes, he is on Earth. I would like you to read this." He passed a stargram across his desk. Spock read it quickly once, then a second time, more slowly. West watched him keenly - looking for any sign in the Vulcan's face that would betray his thoughts. The face revealed nothing.

Spock silently handed the paper back to the admiral.

"Mr. Spock - I would like you to go to Earth to see him."

Spock said nothing - the minutes stretched on, then he looked at West. "Admiral, Captain Kirk must have thought about this a great deal. It would be difficult to change his mind. He tends to be rather stubborn once it is made up."

"You've got to change his mind, Commander," replied West. "How many men of Kirk's calibre do we have in Starfleet? Damn few, and you know it. Can you even start to imagine how many people look up to him - imitate him? In his handling of alien races and respect for other life forms he is light years ahead of the average starship captain, and heaven only knows they are good..."

"Admiral," interrupted Spock, "Jim Kirk is only human. Like every human, he has emotions, doubts, and a conscience. He wants his ship, he wants to serve Starfleet to the best of his ability, but he doesn't want the super-human image that is being built around him. Not now - he has been through too much recently. He has given more than he was capable of giving - to all of us."

"Mr. Spock, it is because of the person he is that the image has grown. You have served with him - you have seen the strength of the man, the capacity of his feelings, of his understanding. He can't help what he is any more than we can help what we are. Please go and talk with him. It can't hurt."

Spock stared at the floor for a few minutes. West's words had struck a very sensitive nerve in the Vulcan's make-up. He needed a moment to control his feelings, to force himself to remain objective. Then he looked up. "Very well, sir. I shall talk with him, for whatever good it might do."

West looked relieved. Looking at the paper in his hand, he said, "I have not divulged the contents of this stargram to anyone and won't until I hear from you. Good luck."



Looking idly at the people passing by the sidewalk cafe, Jim Kirk was attracted by a tall figure - somehow the person looked familiar. Then the man stopped, obviously searching for someone.

"Spock!" Kirk was on his feet. The Vulcan saw him rise and moved over to meet him. "Spock, it is you! What are you doing here? I thought you were on Vulcan."

"I was, Captain, but the symposium finished earlier than I expected. Dr. McCoy had extended an invitation to visit him. I have done so, and, since I was close by..."

"You went to Georgia? You? With McCoy?"

"Yes, sir," said Spock in a puzzled voice. Kirk was laughing heartily.

"Forgive me, Spock...the mental picture is too much to behold. All I can think of is mint juleps and 'Georgia peaches'."

"I assure you, Captain, the good doctor attempted to introduce me to both. I...ah, resisted the temptation."

"Yes, I'm sure you did. Come on, let's get out of here. We've got a lot to talk about."

Walking along the street, Spock appeared interested in the general surroundings. He had been on Earth several times but always on Federation business. He had never had any spare time to look around and appreciate the beauty of the planet. At the same time, he tried to evaluate Kirk, who was walking beside him, talking animatedly about the life style of the small town they were in. Kirk did not mention the stargram - nor did he talk about Starfleet in any way. The omission concerned Spock - whatever was bothering the captain obviously went very deep.



Spock had indeed been to Georgia, but not in response to any invitation from McCoy. He had sought out the doctor to discuss the mental and physical condition of James Kirk. For all his irascibility, McCoy was one of the best medical officers in Starfleet. His studies on mental stress were valued highly by the Surgeon General's office and his papers were required reading in all medical schools. McCoy was concerned but not surprised when Spock related to him the contents of the stargram that Kirk had sent to Admiral West.

"No, Spock, I'm not surprised. This has been building up the last year or so. There were some rough missions for him, I don't need to remind you. His twinning in the transporter, his treatment by Dr. Adams, the court martial, his fateful decision concerning Lazarus. He has kept his feelings bottled up too much. Humans need to release their emotions, Spock, as much as I know you find it distasteful. They have a need to share their joys and sorrows. He has never talked about his brother's death. Have you ever heard him talk about Edith Keeler? No, I didn't think so. He's running, Spock, not from duty or responsibility, he's not that kind of man. But he has been hurt often and hurt badly, probably more than the rest of us realize. We can blow up at each other, we can share our problems - and we usually share our problems with him, which then makes them his problems. He doesn't do that with us. Command image, call it what you will, prevents that. You can perhaps understand that feeling better than the average person - you deny your feelings - no don't interrupt - and since you do have them, although you deny them, you are alone. You force yourself to live this way and your Vulcan heritage permits this. Jim Kirk doesn't have that to fall back on. He's truly alone, Spock."

The two men sat quietly for some time, then McCoy continued, "But Peter West is right. Some men are perfectly suited to do a job. Jim is a starship captain - one of the best. If anyone can change his mind, Spock, it's you. Only, don't push. He has already been pushed to the edge to even consider the step he has taken. The wrong approach will make that step irreversible. I don't envy you your assignment; it will be tricky. I wish I could do something to help but it's up to you now. I wish you luck."



"Spock, you haven't heard a word I've said!"

Spock quickly returned to the present. "I'm sorry, Jim. I was preoccupied."

"Yes, I can see that. No matter, I wasn't making any earth-shattering announcement."

No, agreed Spock silently. You haven't yet mentioned the one subject I have come all this way to hear. But, McCoy said not to push.

The two friends spent a pleasant evening lingering over dinner, enjoying the easy small talk that flows between compatible people. Shortly thereafter, Kirk excused himself, aware that Spock had noticed the usual depression setting in.

"I'm sorry to run out on you, Mr. Spock, but I am going to have to turn in." Noting the Vulcan's inquiring look, he added, "I still get very tired, tired and..."

Spock froze, waiting for the next words, wishing Kirk would keep speaking, but not wanting to hear what he would say. But nothing was forthcoming.

"Jim, if talking would help..."

A slight sadness crossed Kirk's face as he looked at his friend. "Good night, Spock," he said, "I hope you sleep well."

"Good night, Jim."

Spock wandered out into the seall yard surrounding the house. There was a great deal of night activity, crickets chirping in the grass, seall birds twittering in the branches over his head, settling down for the night. Spock appreciated the solitude. He felt he could understand Kirk's attraction to the small town, the quiet surroundings, the friendly people who allowed you to live your own life. Looking up, he saw the moon shining brightly in a cloudless sky, its pale light bathing everything in the area, turning it into a pale semblance of its daytime appearance. He found the scene quite appealing. Once Lt. Uhura had asked him what Vulcan looked like on a lazy evening when the moon was full. When he informed her that Vulcan had no moon, she seemed upset for a reason he didn't understand at the time. Now he felt he understood a bit more why Earth's people set such store by moonlight.

The days drifted past. The townspeople grew accustomed to Spock in their midst and the curiosity the Vulcan had aroused the first few days faded and the two friends were left alone to pursue their own interests. Spock accompanied his captain most places but did not join in many of the activities. While Kirk swam, Spock sat on the grass reading or just letting his mind wander, allowing the images of his surroundings play in his mind. They went for long walks, often going for hours without speaking, just enjoying the company of the other. Spock kept looking for an opportunity to question Kirk about the message which he had sent to Starfleet, but the moment kept eluding him.

Then it happened. Spock knew the minute he entered the house that something was wrong. He had been out buying some groceries from the local store. He was fascinated by the casual method of shopping and went whenever there was an excuse. Even Kirk's teasing hadn't dampened his enthusiasm. Kirk was sitting in the kitchen, his face a blank, a stargram lying crumpled on the table in front of him. Another, unopened, lay beside it. Glancing at it, Spock discovered it was addressed to him. He did not have to open it to know its contents. The repairs to the Enterprise had been completed - their leave was over.

"Jim?"

Without looking at his first officer, Kirk said in a low voice, "I can't go back, Spock. Not as captain. It's over."

"Jim..."

"No, don't say anything." He suddenly looked straight at the Vulcan and Spock almost shrank back from the naked hurt that shone from the hazel eyes. "Spock, in order to command you have to be able to trust your own decisions, to believe in yourself. I've lost that. These past few months I have been going through the motions of being captain - and look at the results. Men have lost their lives - I almost managed to destroy the Enterprise. I made the wrong decision. I tried and I failed. How often can a captain do that and keep his command? It's not fair to his crew, it's not fair to Starfleet." Getting up from the table, Kirk walked over and leaned against the window frame, looking out on the peaceful scene. "The Enterprise will set sail again, Spock, but she will do it under a new captain. I have requested a transfer to shore duty."

There was a long silence, finally Kirk turned and squarely faced his friend. Spock was standing with the stargram still unopened in his hand. A smile touched Kirk's mouth, but not his eyes. "No comment, Commander? No protest? No...logical argument?"

Looking down at the paper in his hand, Spock answered. "I only have one comment. The Enterprise has been called the best ship in the Fleet. Have you ever wondered why? She is not manned by superior members of Starfleet - they're just ordinary people. So, what makes her different? You do, Jim," (Spock looked up at Kirk, his pale eyes holding the tortured eyes of his friend,) "and you are going to have to explain to that crew why Jim Kirk is no longer captain of the Enterprise. Can you do that?"

Kirk turned abruptly and left the room. Spock could hear him moving around, probably packing for the coming journey. The Vulcan went to do the same, fervently hoping he had not said the wrong thing. He had told Kirk the truth, not knowing if the captain was ready to face it. Now Spock felt that Jim Kirk needed to get back to his own world - the world he had once told an alien was his vessel, his oath, and his crew. Only these, Spock knew, would show Kirk how badly he was needed and how wrong his decision had been.

A few hours later, dressed in their Starfleet uniforms, Kirk and Spock beamed aboard the *Victory Sea* - a Federation ship, a good deal smaller than the *Enterprise*, designed as a troop transport. She had phaser weapons, easy maneuverability, and a top warp speed of six. She had been dispatched expressly to get Kirk and Spock. This was duly noted by the Vulcan. Kirk did not seem to find it significant, or, if he did, was keeping his feelings to himself. The *Victory Sea* was commanded by Captain Andrew Ambrose, an experienced, hearty man. His crew was young, the majority of them recent graduates of the Academy getting their 'space legs' before being assigned to one of the larger ships for long term duty.

They got settled in their quarters, then joined Captain Ambrose for dinner.

"I must say, Captain Kirk," said Ambrose, after the yeoman had finished serving them, "it isn't often we have

such distinguished company aboard our little ship. I guess she's not quite what you're used to.

"The name's Jim. She seems like a fine ship, Captain," smiled Kirk. "And doing a very important job. It must be difficult breaking in new people all the time."

"Ah, it's not so bad. Mind you, you never know what to expect. Running a real ship is different from simulated tests at the Academy. Why, I've had my crew shooting phasers when they were supposed to be going into warp drive. Only the other day we almost shifted a space station a few parsecs when the helmsman hit the impulse engine control instead of sub-light. But it keeps life interesting. Better they make their mistakes here than to end up shooting one of your starship's photon torpedoes at Starfleet Headquarters!"

Kirk chuckled and Spock looked pained. The memory of Ensign Chekov's disastrous attempts at efficiency when he first came aboard the *Enterprise* was still clear in both their minds.

After the meal was over, Kirk said goodnight to the others and went to his quarters. He could feel the familiar depression bearing down and was aware of his first officer's growing concern. He couldn't face Spock now - the words the Vulcan had spoken just before they left Earth were still sounding in his mind and he could find no answer to them.

He had been asleep for several hours when the familiar sound of 'red alert' rang in his ears. He was instantly on his feet and reaching for his communication button, wondering why he had not been immediately summoned. Then he remembered - he was not on the *Enterprise*, he was on the *Victory Sea*. He had no authority here, someone else was in command.

He dressed quickly and went out to the observation deck where he was almost immediately joined by Spock. The Vulcan noted the alertness in Kirk's eyes which previously had been missing and smiled inwardly. They were soon joined by a young lieutenant.

"Captain Ambrose thought you might like to come to the bridge, sir," he said, including them both in his sentence.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Kirk. "We would."

They followed their guide into a turbolift and were quickly brought to the center of activity.

"There you are, gentlemen," said Ambrose. "I thought you might be interested in what's going on. Seems to be a small matter of air piracy going on. An Orion ship, to be exact, has raided a torpedo center in the Gamma 498 System. Starbase 12 doesn't have any ships nearer than we are so we are in pursuit; that is, we will be when we get there. This is one time I wish I had the power of a starship!"

Spock silently agreed. The little ship was bouncing as though she was in the middle of an ion storm; obviously her engines were on full power. He and Kirk stood off to one side, out of the way, hanging grimly onto the railing in front of them so they wouldn't be flung off their feet.

A short time later the helmsman let out a triumphant yell. "There it is! The Orion ship!??"

"A little less noise, Ensign," requested Ambrose. "We can all see it perfectly well. Navigator, how far away is it?"

"Forty thousand kilometers, sir. We are closing on it."

"Deflector screens on, arm phasers. Ensign Stewart, open a hailing frequency."

"Aye, sir, frequency open."

"Orion ship - this is the U.S.S. *Victory Sea*. You are ordered to stop."

He was interrupted by a bright light flashing from the alien ship. "Hard about, helm," Ambrose ordered. The ensign quickly complied and the phaser blast passed harmlessly by.

"Well," said Kirk in a low voice. "They don't seem ready to call it a day."

"So it would seem," replied Spock. "They must have a good reason for firing."

"Yes," mused Kirk. "I wonder what it is they want to hide?"

The *Victory Sea* had taken off in pursuit, evasive maneuvers making it difficult for the alien ship to do much more than hit them with an occasional glancing shot. The crew worked efficiently, following the quiet orders of Captain Ambrose. Kirk found himself itching to do something, but he was not in command - only a spectator. Besides, Ambrose was making the correct decisions and obviously needed no help.

"Sir, the Orion ship is slowing."

"Continue evasive action, ensign. Warp 2. What do you make of this, Captain Kirk?"

"I'd be careful, sir. They must have something up their sleeve."

"Up their sleeve, Captain?" inquired Spock. "I am not familiar with that expression."

Amused, Kirk was starting to explain when suddenly the *Victory Sea* was hit hard by a devastating blast. "That was a photon torpedo," thought Kirk in surprise as he went sprawling over the railing he had been holding onto. He hit his head against the edge of the navigation console and things went a bit hazy. Spock quickly helped him to his

feet.

"Captain, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. And you?"

"Undamaged, Captain, but I am afraid the same cannot be said for some of the crew - Captain Ambrose included."

"Ambrose?" echoed Kirk. Looking around, he saw the *Victory Sea*'s captain unconscious on the far side of the bridge, a large gash across his forehead and his leg obviously broken. The navigator looked at him and said, "Captain Ambrose was the only senior officer aboard, sir." Kirk looked astounded.

"What about your second in command?"

"Left him at Starfleet Headquarters - with the measles. This was supposed to be an easy two week run to Earth and back - no trouble anticipated. You are the most senior and experienced officer aboard, sir. I request that you take command."

Kirk looked at Spock. "It would seem the most logical step, Captain," said the Vulcan. Kirk nodded.

"Ensign Stewart, is it," said Kirk. "Contact the Sickbay. Get a doctor up here."

"Right away, sir," came the response. The medical team arrived almost immediately and took Ambrose away on a stretcher.

"Well, Captain, your orders?"

Kirk looked at the impassive face of his first officer. Blast you, Spock, he thought, you are enjoying this. You've got me right where you want me. Then he mentally kicked himself. Get with it, Kirk, this is exactly where you want to be, yourself. Turning from the Vulcan, he hit the intercom on the command chair.

"Report engine status," he ordered.

"Undamaged, sir," came the reply from engineering. The voice sounded a bit puzzled as it was obviously not Captain Ambrose he was talking to, but the voice contained such authority that it felt natural to follow the command. "Number five shield weak, but holding."

"The Orion ship is gathering speed again," said the helmsman.

"Increase speed back to warp 6, helo. Navigator, course 17 mark 2."

"But, sir, that is going to take us away from the pursuit."

"I am aware of that, Ensign; just follow my orders."

"Aye, sir. Course plotted and laid in."

"Mr. Spock, isn't Ceti Alpha V on their course?"

"Yes, Captain. About three parsecs from our present location."

"Good. We will make a wide orbit and meet them from the front."

"But, sir," said the communications officer, "we have had orders to leave Ceti Alpha V strictly alone. The inhabitants are not very friendly."

Kirk smiled grimly. "No, Ensign, they're not. We had a small encounter with them on board the *Enterprise*. Their leader, Khan Noonien Singh, has a few ideas about power. Perhaps he can help us with our friends."

Spock turned away to hide the smile that threatened to break out. Jim Kirk was obviously his old self again - and perhaps even more devious. He almost felt sorry for what the Orions had in store for them.

The little ship arrived at Ceti Alpha ahead of the alien vessel. The Orions obviously thought them too damaged to continue the fight and assumed they had broken off the attack. They were not prepared for the full phaser attack which greeted them as they came near the planet. Their deflectors down, they were quickly disabled.

"Secure from general quarters, Ensign Stewart."

"Sir, you're just going to leave them here?"

"Yes, I am. They have two choices. They can orbit the planet and wait for a Federation starship to come for them, or they can beam down to the surface. However, if they beam down, they will be sorry - and when Khan discovers it is a useless ship that he has orbiting his planet, he is apt to get very angry. But Khan's reputation has spread through the galaxy. My guess is that they will wait peacefully for the Federation. Helmsman, warp one - heading, Starfleet Headquarters."



The senior officers of the *Enterprise* stood respectfully at attention as the executives of Starfleet left the room. Finally, only Admiral West, Under-Secretary of the Cabinet was left.

"Well, Jim," he laughed. "We can't have you on any ship without being in the center of the action. Oh, you may be interested to know the Orion ship was still fully manned when the *Yorktown* arrived. Seems that they were quite aware of Khan's reputation and were not about to beam down. They had photon torpedoes taken in the raid and a very crude system had been built in their ship in order to fire them."

"Yes, the *Victory Sea* was hit with one; that's when Captain Ambrose was hurt. I'm glad they didn't get back

to their home base with them. That's one weapon we can do without defending against."

"Agreed. Well, I suppose that's all. Oh, yes..." He picked up two envelopes from the desk - one a command packet, one a stargram. "Very few people know the contents of either of these, Jim. Which do you want?"

Kirk noticed West and Spock exchanging glances. "Spock, you knew?" Spock nodded. "You too, Bones?"

"Yes, Jim. Spock came to see me about it."

"You can blame me, Jim," said West. "I contacted Commander Spock."

Kirk smiled and reached for the command packet. "You can keep the other one. I got my kick in the pants," he said, looking at Spock. "Besides, I'm not very good at explanations."

Spock's eyebrow lifted as a hand landed on Kirk's shoulder - it was McCoy's. "Welcome home, Jim," he said. "I'll see you aboard the *Enterprise*. I've got to see to medical supplies."

"If you will excuse me, Captain, I also have duties to attend to," said Spock.

Kirk looked at him, amusement on his face. "You make a good baby-sitter, Mr. Spock."

"Sir?" questioned the Vulcan.

"I'll explain later. Go ahead."

Looking puzzled, Spock left with a laughing McCoy.

"Well, Jim, that's about it. Oh, one more thing. You have two new crewmen." Kirk groaned. "No, you will find these two most efficient." He pressed a buzzer and two lieutenants quietly entered the room. Turning, Kirk froze in his tracks for he recognized them from the turbolift. They were the two who had discussed his qualities of leadership so freely.

West continued. "They are of the new breed, Jim; they call a spade a spade. I'm depending on you to prove there is another way."

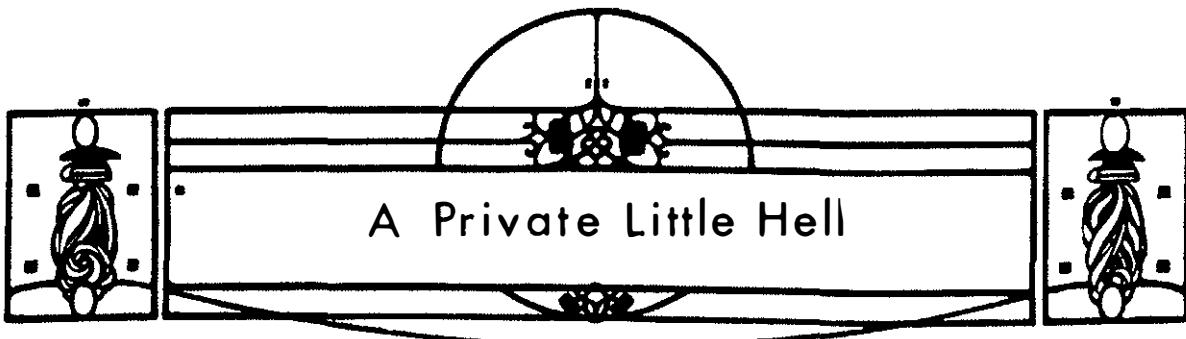
Kirk turned slowly and looked at West, struggling, but fighting a losing battle with his mirth. The expression on the faces across the room were too much - he had never seen two more uncomfortable men in his life. West, seeing Kirk's expression, quickly dismissed them. As the door slid shut, Kirk exploded into laughter. West stared at him in astonishment.

"What on earth is the matter with you?"

Struggling to control himself, Kirk replied, "Nothing, Admiral. I'm sorry. But now you have placed me in the awkward situation of having to go out and make an enemy or achieve perfection. I don't know which prospect is worse."

Shaking West's hand, Kirk left for the *Enterprise*, still laughing. Walking through the familiar corridors, his crew greeting him, he never felt more at home. Within a short time they had settled down to their regular duties and the *Enterprise* warped smoothly out of orbit. The only exception being two new recruits who were uneasily anticipating the road ahead to be a bumpy one.





"We're very tired, Mr. Spock, beam us up home."

Spock felt his stomach knot as he heard Kirk's words. Never before had he heard such hurt and defeat in that voice. He knew the situation on Neural must have demanded more reserves than Kirk had left to give... He swallowed hard, almost reluctant to activate the transporter. He felt an unreasonable surge of guilt for not being with Kirk - he should have beamed down as soon as they were in range. Scotty would have been perfectly capable of handling the ship. How many times he had been torn by regulations, only the distance between the Enterprise and the planet having stopped him from disobeying another regulation.

He took a moment to compose his seething emotions. McCoy would be with Kirk and Spock would show only the neutral face that he permitted others to see. He had already ordered the technician off on some unnecessary errand, only he would face the two men about the beam aboard. He took a deep breath, swallowed, and engaged the transporter.

As the familiar sparkles coalesced into the familiar figures, Spock almost started forward. The beaten look on Kirk's face cut through to the Vulcan's heart. Glancing at McCoy was enough to start anger to burn deep inside. They had been at odds again. Kirk had been forced to face something alone which was tearing him apart. Faced what? Why had McCoy not supported him?

The weary, heart-sick hazel eyes focused back from the distance where his mind had been and they drank in the sight of the Vulcan standing behind the transporter console. McCoy's eyes lit up in delight, happy to see his friend standing whole; he seemed, to Spock's amazement, completely oblivious to Kirk's agony. Spock noticed the small stream of red trickling down McCoy's arm. He moved quickly to the transporter platform.

"You're injured, Doctor..."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kirk slowly turn as if he were in a dream, the amber eyes deepened almost to brown by the emotions he was trying to control.

"Just a scratch, Spock," McCoy reassured the Vulcan. His eyes travelled down to Spock's feet and back up again to his face. "Spock, isn't there anything that can kill you?"

Spock's eyebrow rose fractionally. "There are approximately one million, seven hundred and nineteen thousand, six hundred and twenty-four projectiles that can kill, among an infinite number of other 'things', Doctor. The bullet could easily have been one of them..."

Kirk gave them no time to go any further. He stepped off the transporter platform and turned to McCoy. "Doctor, I'd like your report as soon as possible."

The light died in McCoy's eyes as he held the coldness of Kirk's expression. "Yes, Captain, I'll get on it right away."

"Better stop in Sickbay first, have that arm looked to."

"Yes, sir." McCoy looked a little hesitantly at Kirk but decided against saying anything. The door slid shut behind him.

Kirk let out a deep sigh. Spock stepped toward him as the door swished open and the transporter chief came in. Kirk's eyes met the troubled look of his first officer. "Not here, Spock. Come to my quarters."

The trip was silent. Kirk was in the last stages of control. The strain of the past twenty-four hours was resting heavily on his shoulders. When they got to Kirk's quarters Kirk threw himself down on the bed, his arms across his eyes. One long shuddering sigh escaped as he valiantly tried to regain control. He had had to hold on for so long thinking that Spock was dead, seeing death and hate and hopelessness all around him, and suddenly Spock was here, alive, his concern radiating around the small room.

"Jim..." Spock reached out a hand only to have it painfully clutched by his friend.

"Spock, I didn't dare let myself hope. McCoy was so unsure, so unlike himself. All that time on that damned planet when the only place I wanted to be was here. I think I was a little crazy, I guess both of us were. We fought with each other...Spock, I found myself fighting with McCoy as well as the Klingons..." He saw Spock's brown eyes start to darken. "He gave me his advice as he saw it, Spock. After all, that's why I took him with me..." He ran his hand over his face, then got up and went to his desk, picking up some tapes that had scattered there. "He's not a military man, Spock, he's a humanitarian. I don't know if he can function on the same plane as we do. Even when I was forced to make a command decision he didn't react as you or I would. Guess you could call it a difference in ethics..."

Spock heard the words that Kirk didn't speak, the sense of betrayal, the strain of fighting two sides at once and finding no support anywhere.

Kirk started recording his log for Starfleet. Spock sat silently and listened to the happenings on the planet, how Kirk and McCoy had discovered the Klingons were arming the villagers with flintlocks; the fighting that had divided a peaceful people; Tyree's reluctance to kill until his wife Wona had been murdered. Even in the official language of the report the emotion came through. Kirk felt responsible for a friend, a people, a way of life that now had to change in order for a world to survive.

He finished his report and leaned back. "It had to be done, Spock. Left as it is the villagers will destroy Tyree's people." He smashed his fist on the desk as his anger flowed over. "Damn, this should never have happened..."

Spock was on his feet, his strong arms almost lifting Kirk to his feet. "Jim, there was nothing else that anyone could have done..." Kirk slumped against him momentarily letting the Vulcan take some of the strain. "You'd better get some sleep, Captain." Spock half-carried Kirk to the sleeping alcove. He helped him down and watched as Kirk rolled over on his stomach and buried his head in his arms. He waited until Kirk was lying quietly, then left to seek out McCoy.

The doctor was in Sickbay where M'Benga was completing treatment to the bullet wound. Spock waited quietly until he finished and left them alone.

"You have a problem, Mr. Spock?" McCoy said, eying the Vulcan.

"Not precisely, Doctor, a question would be a better word."

"Come into my office." McCoy poured himself a drink then sat down behind his desk.

"Well?"

"The question is why, Doctor?"

McCoy nodded. He wasn't surprised at Spock confronting him. He had been expecting it. "Spock, I'm not like you - those people are not black and white statistics. They have been given the means to become something they weren't meant to be. We forced our way of life on them..."

"Not 'we', Doctor. The Klingons were here first. Do you want a blood bath? That is what history reads where power is not balanced..." He stood, his brown eyes darkened almost to black as he stared down at the human. "Jim asked you to give your advice as an expert, which you did..." He fell silent for a moment, then continued, "...but even an expert can be a friend, Doctor. The Captain needed your support as a friend far more than he needed an expert. What name do you give to what you did to him?" The Vulcan's burning eyes held McCoy's until the latter was unable to meet his gaze, then Spock turned on his heel and left. McCoy took a long swallow of his drink as he continued to look at the spot where Spock had been standing.

"I'm just a human, Spock, a friend who cannot possibly give what you can and do to a man who means a great deal to both of us. You argue with him but would follow him through the gates of hell and that's where we differ. I show him the hell he is going to. I can't be the man you expect to be worthy of Kirk's loyalty, you and I are too different ever to be able to meet on the same plane. I value Jim in a far different way than you - I can never again expose myself to the tremendous pain that comes with such a friendship. I'm sorry..."

Later, when Spock returned to Kirk's quarters, he discovered Kirk sitting at his desk, still dressed in the native costume of the hill people. He glanced at Spock but gave no greeting. The intercom whistled.

"Kirk here." The voice was soft, exhaustion still sounding strong.

"Scotty, Captain. The flintlocks are ready and in the transporter room."

Kirk's eyes met Spock. The Vulcan's eyes agreed to his decision. "It is necessary Jim, only now will a balance of power assure the survival of the planet." Kirk nodded, a look of infinite sadness passing over his face. He started to answer then the buzzer rang.

"Hold on a minute, Scotty." Kirk hit the automatic lock. The door opened to reveal McCoy standing there, computer tape in hand. He had changed back into his Starfleet uniform.

"My report, Captain."

Kirk took it and put it on the table without looking at it.

"You still feel the same way?"

McCoy nodded. "Yes, Jim, I do. I'm sorry."

Kirk nodded slowly. "So am I, Bones. This is one time human feelings should not be involved." He smiled slightly. "A doctor can afford to be human - a commanding officer can't." McCoy's eyes clouded with concern but Kirk looked away. "I think the Vulcans have the answer..." Spock struggled with his emotions, not daring to look at McCoy. Kirk turned back to the still flashing intercom. "Thank you, Doctor," he said by way of dismissal. McCoy hesitated, then turned and left. Kirk reopened the line to Scotty.

"Scotty, I'll be there in a couple of minutes. Kirk out." He stood up and went back into the other room to get a tricorder. Coming out he met Spock's eyes but turned away without speaking. The door slid shut behind him leaving Spock in an empty room.



The burial was over. It had been a quiet ceremony of the Kanutu. Kirk stood by himself at the outer fringe of the men. The women were absent, only warriors attended such a ritual. His eyes were on Tyree. The grief that had been so evident earlier that day was gone, replaced by a grim determination. There was no doubt that Tyree had joined the fight. There would be no peace for a while, not until the grief of Nona's death had been assuaged. Yutan stood on Tyree's right, staunch friend and supporter. Kirk was glad Tyree had such a friend - the next weeks were going to be most difficult for a man once sworn only to peace.

Kirk looked at the freshly filled grave. He had taken an instant dislike to Nona, and even though she had saved his life he had distrusted her and her motives. She was ruthless and ambitious; it had led to her death.

The men gradually drifted away leaving only Kirk and Tyree. Slowly Tyree turned and faced his friend. Their eyes held. Neither had any words which could possibly express their feelings. They were friends, yet strangers. Nona had come between them. Tyree did not blame Kirk for her death, yet if he had not come back Nona would still be alive. Kirk knew he had brought a sorrow to this man's life that would eventually pale but would never be forgotten. They were no longer the young men dreaming dreams. They were grown men who were forced to face the world that men lived in. There was no use stating the obvious.

"You have the guns?"

"At the camp."

"Come." They walked side by side. "You will return with new ones as do the Klingons?"

"Yes, as long as it is necessary."

Tyree nodded. "It will be necessary."

Kirk stopped. "Tyree, it doesn't have to go on like this. The Klingons have violated the peace of your world. They have done wrong. I will see to it that they are stopped..."

The light eyes looked at him no longer at peace. "James, once the killing has started it will not stop. I have tried to deny it but it is the truth..." He hesitated. "You have done the only thing possible. Come, we must make sure the men are armed..."

A half hour later all Tyree's men had flintlocks, powder and bullets, everything they needed to hold their side of the balance of power. For the moment they could defend themselves.



When Kirk beamed back to the Enterprise, Spock met him in the transporter room. "A message from Starbase 12, sir."

"Not here, Spock. Come to my quarters."

Starfleet had received the reports. The orders were immediate; they would contact the Organians. The Enterprise was to go straight to Starbase 12. Admiral Fitzgerald wanted a personal report along with the tricorder readings that had been taken to back up the statements on the reports. Starfleet was worried - very, very worried.

"We'll be at Starbase 12 in 27.4 hours, Captain."

Kirk nodded, slowly taking off the skin vest, boots, and leather pants. He sat on the edge of the bed looking pale and defeated. The mark on his face left by the mugato stood out clearly. The shock of what had happened was starting to sink in. Spock looked at him, worry clearly stamped on his face.

"Jim, shouldn't you report to Sickbay?"

Kirk looked up, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck. "I'm all right, Spock, a bit tired..."

"A mugato bite leaves more than fatigue in its wake..."

Kirk's eyes darkened. "I told McCoy not to bother you with that."

"He didn't, Jim. I asked him...and about his disagreement with you..."

"He gave me his advice as he saw it, Spock. After all, that's why I took him down with me." He looked at

Spock's set face and knew that the Vulcan had heard his words for what they were - words. Not defending, not condemning - just a statement. He lay back on his bed. "Spock, can you finish out this watch? I don't think I'm up to it." He waited until Spock had left, then rolled over and buried his face into his pillow trying to blot out ugly memories.



The ambush had been successful. Now all those who had been involved in Nona's death were dead. Tyree and Yutan stood by the bodies while the others gathered the villagers' rifles.

"It's finished, Tyree. They are all dead now."

Tyree looked up and gazed into the distance. "No, Yutan, it will not finish here. Apella will hear of this and send the villagers after us. This is not the end of the killing but only the beginning. Come, we must make plans..." He motioned to the others and they melted away into the hills.



Kirk stood to attention as Admiral Fitzpatrick walked in. They knew each other quite well, but this was a military investigation, not a friendly meeting. Fitzgerald nodded his greeting and sat down. Kirk followed suit.

"I've talked to Commander Spock and Dr. McCoy, Captain, and read your report as well as those of your senior officers..." He picked up a tape. "...Your report is somewhat at odds with Dr. McCoy's..."

"Yes, sir, it is."

"You feel you took necessary action in disregarding both your orders and the prime directive?"

"Yes, sir, it was the only course left open to me considering the Klingon interference with the normal evolution of the planet."

"Manning the guns..."

"Yes, sir."

Fitzpatrick switched off the computer. He looked at Kirk sitting straight and slightly defiant across the desk from him. "I agree, Jim, it was a dirty, deadly decision but the right one..." He saw a faint slump of the broad shoulders, the hazel eyes slightly clouding. "We expect to hear from the Organians at any moment. They are meeting now to decide what the Klingon punishment will be."

Kirk nodded slightly. Fitzpatrick stood up and walked around the desk, putting his hand on Kirk's shoulder.

"Jim, it was my order thirteen years ago that you to that planet. The work you did there was brilliant. I'm only sorry it had to be you who discovered the end of a paradise. Your solution took a steadfast courage in the face of advice which told you that you were wrong. If you hadn't interfered there would have been an all out slaughter. You prevented that..." He turned back toward his desk and picked up a small box. "I was told how deeply it hurt you, so I asked that there be no ceremony to go with this..." He turned back and held out the small black case.

Kirk took it and looked up at Fitzgerald with a surprised look.

"Open it."

The colors swam together in front of his eyes - the Prantares Ribbon of Commendation - First Class. A very rare award given only in situations where one person is responsible for the survival of a world or a culture.

Kirk closed the box gently and said in a low voice. "I haven't saved anyone, Admiral. I brought war to people who did not know how to hate, to kill. Is that what Starfleet's rewarding now?"

"Commander Spock said you wouldn't want to accept this, Jim. That's why it's only between you and me...and your record."

"Spock knows?"

"Yes. Command wanted a ceremony. I asked his opinion. I value his judgment, Jim. You're not the only one who thinks he's the best first officer in the Fleet. A man like that often knows his captain better than the captain knows himself. He doesn't have emotion clouding his opinion..."

Kirk nodded and opened the box again, his mind drifting back to Neural...



The villagers' raids were getting bolder. They were striking almost to the hill people's main camp and each battle left more dead on each side. Tyree found that his hate had left him and only a sickness remained. There was too much killing, too much hate. They were forced to kill or be killed. Finally Tyree reached a decision.

"Yutan," he said, "send for the man. It is time to stop retreating. Either we make peace with the villagers or we will have to take the offensive. We cannot afford to lose so many."

He sat at the entrance of the cave. His mind went back to Nona. Funny, he could scarcely remember her - her spells had held him faithful to her. Now that the spells were gone, her memory also was fading. What had not faded was the look on James' face as he took the rock away, the rock with which he had killed the villager. That man he

loved as a brother, those hazel eyes so full of sorrow and understanding. He knew what had caused Tyree to kill. He knew it was inevitable and he knew he was the cause - he and the world he represented.

"Do not blame yourself, James," Tyree said softly to himself. "She caused it. I did not understand until too late what her ambition was. It would have come to this even if you had not returned."

His thoughts were interrupted by the return of Yutan and the others.



By day's end the Organians had answered. The Klingons were to be severely punished. Krell was already being dealt with and those who had ordered him on his mission were being sought out. The Enterprise was to go back to Neural and bring the warring sides together. Kirk had interfered. It was accepted that he had for the moment prevented the hill people from being destroyed, but he had interfered. Now it was up to him to put a stop to the senseless killing.



Apella was busy dividing up the spoils of the last raid when the word came. There was a delegation of hill people to see him. They were unarmed and had come in peace.

"In peace, indeed. They have shown little feeling for peace in the past few weeks," said Apella to Brode, his second-in-command.

"Apella," said Brode, "at least listen to them. This fighting does no good. We gain nothing and many have died. Would it not be best to stop? We lived in peace before the Klingons came. We could do so again."

"Peace, Brode? Do you remember how we had to work, how little we owned, how hard it was to barter? To take is easy, it requires no effort. Look at our people. They love this life. You are growing soft..." His eyes darkened. "However, we shall hear what these hill people have to say. Maybe the message we send back with them will finally convince Tyree that we mean what we say."

Brode looked at him, unwilling to think what Apella meant but knowing only too well what was going to happen.



"Two more hours, Captain."

"Acknowledged, Helm. Scotty, you have the con. Mr. Spock, come with me."

Kirk ordered the turbolift to Deck 5 and silently led the way to his quarters. There he contacted ship's stores for native costumes for both Spock and himself.

"Only two men, Captain, against a whole society?"

"Not against, Spock, for, and I don't think force is the way. Tyree doesn't want this. I can't speak for the villagers but we've got to talk them into surrendering their weapons. It's not logical that a planet as peaceful as this one once was would change overnight. I'm taking a chance that only a few of the villagers were swayed by the Klingons. The others are only followers, perhaps too scared to say no. Maybe they are only following their leaders blindly. Maybe we can lead them in a different direction."

"A lot of maybe's, Jim."

Kirk's tired eyes met Spock's. "Agreed, but I think those maybe's are the only chance we have..."



What was left of the peace delegation was returned to Tyree's camp. One lived long enough to deliver Apella's rejection. Tyree stood for a long minute looking at them. When he turned it wasn't necessary to say anything. His men knew what must be done.

"One of us must get Apella," said Tyree in a voice drained of all emotion.

They waited until evening. The twilight covered their movements. They infiltrated the village, the guards around the perimeter had no chance. When the alarm finally came it was too late.

The fighting was fierce. Each side fought out of sheer desperation. There was no turning back now, this battle would end only in death.



Kirk and Spock beamed down near Tyree's camp. It was empty except for some very frightened women. It did not take long for them to relate what had been happening. Kirk grabbed Spock's arm and they headed for the village.

It was dark when they arrived. Rifle fire punctuated the air with short, sharp flashes of fire as the rifles were shot. They avoided the villagers and finally caught up with some of Tyree's men.

"Where is Tyree?" Kirk demanded in a low whisper.

"He is after Apella. It is his order that Apella be killed. Maybe then there can be peace with the villagers..."

Kirk nodded. That sounded more like the Tyree he knew. He told the men to stay put and he and Spock crept off into the darkness. They held a quick conference in an alley away from the fighting.

"Apella lives behind the building where McCoy and I found the forge. We've got to get there before Tyree, Spock. If we can stop Apella maybe we can put an end to this. Come on."

They sprinted down the narrow streets, ducking fire as they went. Often they had to dive for cover and crawl to safer areas. They were bruised and scraped by the time they reached their destination.

They were also about thirty seconds too late. Tyree and his men were charging the building. Guns were firing on both sides, men were falling but the hill people kept coming. Running hard, Kirk and Spock joined the end of the rush.



The attack succeeded. The door fell under the onslaught. Men who stood their ground died. Tyree and Apella met, only the width of the room dividing them.

"So, Tyree, you have decided to join the witch they say was your wife," said Apella with a sneer.

"No, Apella, I came to ask you to lay down your weapons, to let our peoples once again live in peace."

A chilling smile crossed Apella's face. "Peace is for the weak. You are weak, Tyree, to believe that my people would accept it..."

"Have you asked them, Apella, or are you forcing your will on them?"

As he burst in the door, Kirk saw Apella's hand start moving, saw the knife catch the light as the villager lunged forward.

"Tyree!"

Too late Tyree saw the movement and tried to get out of the way. The knife hit its mark and Tyree collapsed backward into Kirk's arms.

At the same instant a gun exploded. Apella stood with an astonished look spreading over his face, then toppled forward. Brode stood behind him, smoke curling out of his rifle. Some of Tyree's men started forward but Yutan's voice stopped them.

"It has ended. Put down your weapons. What we have come for has been done." They stopped but stood in an uneasy group eying the villagers who were looking at Apella's silent form.

Only Spock saw the real drama, saw what was happening. Tyree was cradled in Kirk's arms, his head propped up on Kirk's shoulder. His voice was very low.

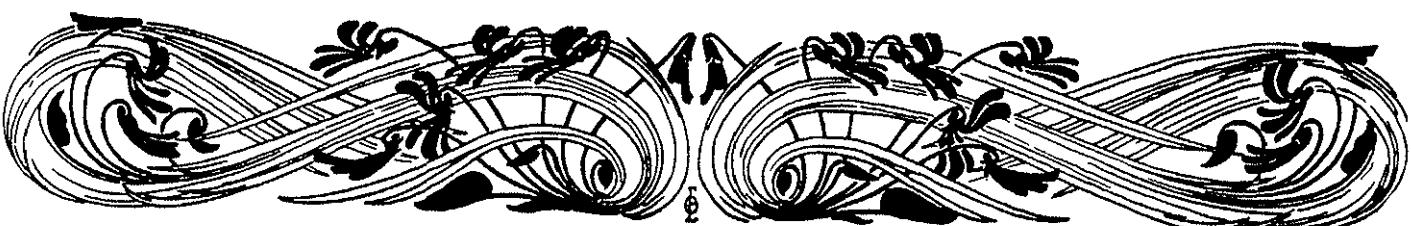
"My people have peace again. I was right to trust our friendship, James. What you told me those many years ago is true - all men are brothers. Only a few didn't believe and they died. Mona..." He coughed painfully, bringing Yutan to his side. Tyree reached out and touched Yutan's arm. "Yutan, it is up to you now. Let the villagers know we want to leave in peace. It is all we ever wanted. Look to James for help. He is...a...friend...my brother..." His head dropped, his hand slipped off Yutan's arm. Yutan took the limp hand and gripped it tightly.



Kirk stood alone at the side of the grave. The ceremony had been brief. Life and death were accepted here - grief was something to be borne in the depths of one's own heart, and Tyree's people had gone to grieve. Kirk looked around at the hills to the valley below. The paradise he had described as a young man had turned into a hell - the inhabitants had been torn apart by opposing ideologies. Who was right? Who was wrong? Wasn't he just as guilty as the Klingons? He had interfered. A friend, a good friend, a man who loved life and peace as much as he did had died because of him.

Spock was right. He had had to interfere. If he hadn't, all the hill people would have died. Bones was right. He said that Tyree would die because of Kirk's decision - and he had.

Kirk took out his communicator with his eyes lingering on the fresh mound of earth. The hill people had gone to grieve the death of their leader. It was time that he went to grieve for his friend - and brother.





BREAKING POINT

"Medical Log. Stardate 4701.7. Chief Medical Officer Leonard McCoy reporting. Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock are both finally resting comfortably. The Captain's injuries, although extensive, should heal with no complications. However, it will take a period of some weeks before I will be able to certify him fit for command. Commander Spock's injuries were more serious and will require several operations to repair damage from deep-seated burns. Dr M'Benga has pronounced himself satisfied that they will cause no permanent damage, and Mr. Spock should be able to return to duty at approximately the same time as Captain Kirk due to the superior healing abilities of the Vulcan race. I once again officially log that I strongly objected to the assignment which caused the previously stated injuries. Neither the Captain nor the First Officer were in any condition after their ordeal on planet Omega IV to take on the responsibilities assigned them over by objections by Starfleet Command."

McCoy sighed as he switched off the computer. He leaned back in his chair, lines of exhaustion marking his face. Only ten days had passed since they had first discovered the Exeter locked in an abandoned orbit around Omega IV, but those ten days would remain burned in his memory for as long as he lived. The senseless events that had started there and then followed them to the planet Elgat, left McCoy wondering if it was worth defending the ideals that had always been so important to him - and so impossible to achieve. Turning in his chair, he switched on his personal log.

"I saw Jim almost cry tonight. It has shaken me more than any of the events of the past week. He is always so confident, at least outwardly, always taking on all problems, that at times he makes you forget he's merely human and things can get too much, even for him.

"I find it hard to believe what happened - mankind thinks itself so advanced, yet the brutality of the species remains. Occasionally I find myself thinking Spock might have something - suppress emotions and you might not end up beating the hell out of each other...."

He paused, a slight smile crossing his face as he considered the impossibility of what he had just said, then ran his hand through his hair as he continued. "I don't think Spock knows I saw Jim. If he does he didn't comment on it. He might suppress his own emotions, but he's certainly the man who understands Jim best when the pressure is greatest. Only a few months ago Spock told him that no one had ever declared Starfleet duty particularly safe, but I sometimes find myself wondering how much is enough?"



Kirk followed Spock and McCoy from the room. He couldn't remember ever feeling this sick. His head was threatening to split open and it was taking all his effort not to pass out on the spot. He hardly spared a glance at Captain Ron Tracey, once one of Starfleet's finest commanders, now clearly across the border of insanity. As he stepped out into the light he stumbled, unable to focus clearly. McCoy grabbed him and Kirk allowed the doctor to take his full weight, trying not to cry out as McCoy's steady arm passed across the screaming pain in his back. Everything whirled for a moment, then Kirk slowly straightened.

McCoy was frightened. Kirk never let himself go like this. He had seen his fight with Tracey, but that couldn't account for his present condition. He turned worried eyes to Spock, but the Vulcan was struggling to keep himself upright, badly weakened from the phaser blast which should have killed him and would have had he been human. What was keeping him on his feet was known only to Spock.

"Probably his worry for Jim," thought McCoy. He relaxed his hold on the Captain as Kirk's muscles tensed and

he seemed to regain his balance.

"Jim?"

The large, pain-filled eyes that met McCoy's were dilated. "Concussion at least," thought McCoy.

"I'll...be all right, Bones." He turned to Sulu. "We'll stay in orbit...long enough to beam you back aboard."

"Aye, sir."

Painfully Kirk reached around and took out his communicator. It was beginning to hurt to breathe and everything was going fuzzy. He silently willed himself to remain standing. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Aye, Captain." Scotty's reassuring voice came as a blessed relief. No matter what went wrong, Scotty was always standing by like a pillar of strength.

"Four to beam up, Scotty. Have...security team in the transporter room...."

McCoy flipped open his own communicator. "Scotty, get M'Benga and a medical team as well - and two stretchers." McCoy ignored Kirk as the Captain tried his best glare, but could only come up with a rather out-of-focus stare.

"Right away, Doctor. Ready to beam up."

Kirk's hand closed McCoy's communicator, the only way he could at the moment show his displeasure. He spoke into his own.

"Energize...."



He knew he was going to pass out; the dizziness that hit him as he materialized sent waves of nausea flooding through him. He staggered forward, vaguely aware of some red-shirted arms reaching out to catch him. He gratefully accepted their help, knowing there was no way he could stand on his own.

Pain resounded through his body and it felt like an axe had been buried in his head. After a few seconds he felt a bit better and he managed to focus his eyes.

"Escort Captain Tracey to the brig - maximum security...I want a medical team to look him over...and their reports turned in on the double." He waited until the security men had left, then turned to Scotty. "We need time for...acclimatise below...Sulu..."

Scotty nodded, worry stamped on his face. "Aye, we'll see to it."

"Come on, Jim." More strong arms circled him and guided him to the waiting stretcher. He moaned softly as they eased him on. McCoy glanced at M'Benga who was hovering over a rapidly breathing, unconscious Vulcan. He looked back and shook his head.



The entire world was tilting at a crazy angle and his head felt like it was going to blow off. He moaned and tried to shield his still-closed eyes from the light. Almost instantly the light was dimmed and the diagnostic panel shut off.

"Stay still, Jim."

McCoy's quiet voice. How often that calm manner had met his momentary panic as he surfaced from the blackness of unconsciousness.

"Hurt...."

"I'll bet you do. Just stay still, you've got a walloping skull fracture on top of a fair concussion."

"Um..." Kirk lay still for a few moments, then came the question McCoy had been waiting for. "Spock?"

"He's holding his own. Don't worry about him. Try to get some sleep."

Kirk was silent for a few minutes, then he opened his eyes, the pupils still dangerously enlarged. "Have to talk to Scotty...."

"No, Jim, not now. You've got to rest."

"Have to inform Starfleet...."

"Not now! Not until you get some more sleep."

"Head hurts...."

McCoy felt helpless. He had read the results of Kirk's tests. Along with the skull fracture and concussion, he had badly bruised kidneys and ribs and had obviously been brutally beaten. There were large contusions all over his body and his throat was swollen with pressure weals as though someone had tried to strangle him.

"I know it does. Just try to take it easy."

A tiny smile touched Kirk's lips. "Poor Bones...mother hen...one chick..."

"Now look, if you're gonna be insulting, I'll leave...." But Kirk's eyes had closed. McCoy flicked on the panel above the bed and put his hand on Kirk's burning forehead. The Captain had lapsed into unconsciousness again. McCoy decided to let him sleep for about half an hour then wake him again.



McCoy had collapsed behind his desk when M'Benga came in. "Well?"

M'Benga's dark eyes were sober. "I'm beginning to think that nothing can kill that Vulcan. He's still in shock and there's some internal damage from the phaser blast but, considering that he should be dead, I guess it's encouraging."

"Um...."

M'Benga looked sharply at McCoy. "What's the matter?"

McCoy looked a little sheepish. "Nothing. I just don't like both of them out of commission at the same time. I have a funny feeling something's going to happen...." He laughed softly. "To mother hens everywhere...."

M'Benga looked puzzled but didn't comment. He had seen the outcome of McCoy's premonitions before. He turned toward the door. "I'm going to check on Spock again, then get some sleep. Christine said she'd stay with him." McCoy nodded absently. M'Benga knew that McCoy would trust Kirk to no one but himself.



"Come on, Jim, wake up."

The pain-filled eyes gradually opened, staring huge in the pale face. Kirk's breathing was very shallow as he tried not to move his injured ribs.

"How's Spock?"

"M'Benga seems pleased. Nurse Chapel is with him. He's sleeping now." McCoy did not bother to say that Spock had yet to regain consciousness. "I think he's going to be all right."

As McCoy checked Kirk's vital signs, Kirk drifted off again. Satisfied that there was no change for the worse, he looked in on Spock, then headed for his office where he nearly collided with Scotty who was just coming out.

"Doctor, we just got a priority call from Starfleet. There's some sort of trouble and we're to go and find out what if we can. Headquarters is in a real flap. We're the closest starship and they need the information in a hurry."

"What about Sulu and the others?"

"We've got to leave now, Doctor. Even at maximum warp it'll take us seventy-two hours to get there."

"I suppose Jim'll need to know...." The Scot's dark eyes acknowledged McCoy's statement. "Be as brief as you can, Scotty, he's pretty shaky."

Kirk listened to Scotty with no interruption. It hurt to concentrate - all he wanted to do was to let himself drift back into the welcome blackness, but he forced himself to stay awake.

"Scotty...contact Sulu, tell him he's...stuck for a while. They'll be all right. Tell Starfleet...we're on our way."



"Dr. McCoy, Mr. Spock is awake!"

McCoy threw the chart down on his desk. "Call Dr. M'Benga, Nurse, tell him to get down here on the double!"

Within moments M'Benga was there, giving Spock a thorough, slow exam. He was concerned by the amount of pain that still registered. He shoved a hypo against the Vulcan's shoulder. "You need more sleep," he said, watching the arrows rise and fall as the drug took effect.

"In a moment, Doctor," answered Spock. His voice was low and unsteady as he fought to breathe evenly against the pain that wracked his body.

M'Benga looked at him. "Soon, then."

Spock nodded agreement. Satisfied, M'Benga left. As soon as he had gone Spock looked at McCoy.

"Jim?"

"He's hurt, Spock, badly. Skull fracture. What in hell happened down there? Those injuries didn't all happen in his fight with Tracey."

"Captain Tracey put him in a cell with Cloud William. They fought for over three hours. Cloud William was much stronger than the Captain. There was nothing I could do...." The dark eyes shut as though to block out some inner pain. "They were loosening the bars in the cell, the Captain called out that he would have me free in a minute...." He opened his eyes, the anguish of his inability to help Kirk clearly visible. "I did not see it happen, Doctor, but I heard it very clearly. Cloud William hit Jim with an iron bar. He was unconscious for seven hours and eight minutes."

"And then he had to fight Tracey in hand to hand combat!" said McCoy. His face darkened. "He's got such heavy bruises over his kidneys where Tracey kicked him it's a miracle they still function."

"Will he be all right?"

"I think so, Spock. Wish I could give him something for the pain, but with that head injury I don't dare. Fortunately he's drifting a lot, at least he gets some respite from it. Knowing you're going to be all right is

helping...."

Just then the *Enterprise* vibrated slightly.

"We're shifting into warp drive, Doctor," said Spock, his eyebrow lifting slightly.

"Got a call from Starfleet, Spock. Priority job somewhere three days from here. Jim knows about it. Scotty's got command. We've left our personnel on the planet...."

"The Captain left Mr. Scott in command?"

McCoy looked puzzled. "Yes, why?"

Spock didn't seem to hear his question. He lay quiet for a moment, then shut his eyes and within moments was asleep. McCoy's face slowly cleared as he realized the impact of his words. Kirk had left Scotty in command, which let Spock know that he was remaining in sickbay and the Vulcan didn't have to worry about him. He could afford to concentrate all his efforts on healing. McCoy looked at him affectionately. "No emotion, eh, Spock? Bull feathers...." There was no response from the silent figure, just the faintest lift and fall of the thermal blanket which covered the still form.



McCoy and M'Benga had finished checking their respective patients and were making their way to McCoy's office. Kirk so far had shown little improvement but at least there had been no complications, no uncontrollable internal pressure on the brain, no bleeding. And as the hours passed, so did the danger. Spock was still in a deep sleep. He had elected not to enter a healing trance, and McCoy felt he wouldn't do so until he was sure that Kirk was out of danger. They had just walked into the office when the explosion happened and they were both thrown violently against the wall.

"What the devil was that?" said McCoy as he helped M'Benga back onto his feet.

Up on the bridge, Scotty had a similar reaction. He slammed down the intercom. "Engineering, what the devil are you doing down there?"

A coughing voice answered him. "Reactor overload, Mr. Scott; everything is superheating."

Scotty was spluttering as he headed for the turbo-lift. "Lt. Uhura, take over. I'll be in Engineering."

And there he would be staying. It would be a tricky job to keep the warp engines from overheating, and they didn't have time to drop to impulse speed to make the necessary repairs. McCoy appeared briefly to check on any injuries and sympathize with Scotty, but he soon left. Scotty had enough to do without wasting time in idle chatter.

As he headed back to sickbay he suddenly froze. The *Enterprise* was on a priority call. He felt a chill run down his spine. Kirk was sequestered in sickbay - if he found out....



Spock found out first. He met McCoy as the Doctor entered the sickbay. McCoy took in the pale figure dressed in his familiar blue uniform.

"Acting as your own doctor, Spock? I don't agree with your evaluation if you think you're fit for duty. My log shows it...."

The dark eyes met his squarely. "No, Doctor, I do not, for once, disagree with your diagnosis, but I do pose a question. Which of us is more fit for command, the Captain or myself?"

McCoy stood silent. Neither man was fit but if it came to a matter of choice he knew Spock had more control over his injuries. "All right, Spock, but take it as easy as you can."

An eyebrow lifted. "Affirmative, Doctor."



McCoy kept Kirk isolated and worried about the moment when he would find out what was going on. He managed to keep him out of action for all of two days. He was catching up on his log when two hands slammed down on the desk in front of him. Looking up he found burning eyes boring into his from a pale face.

"Why, Doctor?"

"Because you're not fit for duty, Captain!"

"And Spock is? Come on, Bones, I want a straight answer."

"All right. You were hurt - badly. Spock was hurt - badly. You're human, he's Vulcan."

"Half Vulcan."

"Which is half more than you are!" McCoy flushed, realizing that he had been yelling. He lowered his voice. "He can control his body functions and heal as he works, you can't."

"We're on a priority call - my responsibility...."

"If you're in command!" McCoy braced himself for the onslaught.

"You saying I'm not?" The voice was very quiet - deadly quiet.

"What do you think?"

Kirk drew in a deep breath, wincing as his ribs moved, grim evidence of the still present damage. He took his hands off the table and sat down.

"Can I at least confer with Spock?"

McCoy's eyes softened. "Jim, I'm not taking command away from you. I just want you to realize your physical limitations." His eyes twinkled slightly. "At present we are having a difficult time keeping any officers of command rank on the bridge. Uhura was willing to stay in command but she wasn't happy about it, not in this instance, anyway. If you promise to go slow you can go back on half duty, but any time you're not busy I want you back in bed...."

McCoy sat staring at the empty chair that Kirk had left. He should no more be allowed to run the ship than fly to Andromeda, but then neither should Spock. Scotty couldn't. He had all he could do to hold the engines together. Sulu wasn't on board and they were on a priority mission. What could he do? Kirk wasn't going to die if he resumed duty - neither was Spock. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he should have kept them both in sickbay.



The disapproval shone from Spock's eyes as he stood in Kirk's quarters surveying his Captain. The dark bruises stood out on Kirk's chest, arms, and neck, mute testimony to his ordeal on Omega IV. The slowness of Kirk's movements told of unspoken pain.

Kirk pulled on his uniform shirt and turned to Spock, a glint of mischief showing on his face. "Don't start with the arguments, Spock, I've got you all the way down the line. No matter what you say I can answer you. Care to try?"

Spock conceded his words with a slight nod.

"All right, now, what do we have?"

"Not very much, Captain. We are heading for Elgat...."

"Elgat!" echoed Kirk. "That's where Ber is located, isn't it?"

"Precisely, Captain. It is sitting in the middle of a Klingon controlled planet, a free city in the midst of totalitarian rule."

Kirk looked sober. "I don't much want to tangle with the Klingons, Spock."

"Agreed, Captain. I believe, however, that the Klingons have the same reservations. They know the importance of the symbolism of Ber to the Federation. Just as they regard their city of Ktgnan on our planet Rigel 4 an important symbol of their system."

"But what could they be up to?"

"Unknown. However, until we get to Ber we must be prepared for the worst eventuality."

"Ever the optimist, aren't you, Spock?"

"It's always best to be prepared, Captain." Solemn eyes met Kirk's and the human felt a coldness clutch at his heart. Premonition? But of what?



McCoy looked up in surprise as the two men walked into his office. Glancing at the chronometer he was even more surprised - it had been less than an hour since he had reluctantly released Kirk.

"Well, I'm glad to see both of you have returned to your senses. Beds are ready and waiting...."

A gentle hand stopped McCoy's contact with the intercom. "Sorry, Bones," said Kirk softly, "that's not exactly why we've come." He sat down gingerly. McCoy noted Spock's eyes never left Kirk. That had always been a bad omen.

"All right, why are you here?" asked McCoy, his voice a little on edge.

Kirk looked at Spock for support, then plunged ahead. "We need your help...."

"If you think I'm going to run the ship, forget it!"

A smile touched Kirk's eyes. "Don't worry, I wouldn't trust you. No, it's more than that."

The intercom at McCoy's elbow sounded. "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Kirk glanced at Spock, annoyed at the interruption. He pushed down the intercom. "Kirk here, Lieutenant, what is it?"

"Sir, there's another message coming in from Starfleet on the priority channel."

"Damn," thought Kirk, "all this can't be happening." He rose slowly to his feet. "I'll take it in my quarters, Lieutenant." He hesitated for a moment, then continued. "I would like you there as well, Uhura." The answer from his communications officer showed surprise, but she would meet them there. "Spock, you're with me." He glanced apologetically at McCoy. "Sorry about the interruption, Doctor...." McCoy sat for a long time in his office wondering what was so secret that he wasn't to know about it.

Kirk and Spock slowly made their way to Kirk's quarters. Finally Kirk broke the silence. "I don't think I'm going to tell McCoy after all, Spock, at least not tell him the real reason about our visit to Ber." He glanced at Spock and saw the surprise he'd anticipated. "What we're planning is going to be highly dangerous - neither of us is exactly fit. If something happens and we're caught, he'll be all right because he won't know what's going on...." He broke off, a distant look coming into his eyes.

"That's not all, is it Jim?"

"No," agreed Kirk, "that's not all. We may not all get back together. If he needs to know we'll tell him, but not before. I don't want to see him hurt."

Several hours later McCoy buzzed at the entrance to Kirk's quarters. He had stopped by to see if Kirk and Spock were eating dinner but either he had missed them, which he doubted, or they were not bothering to eat.

There was no answer to his first buzz so he tried again, this time putting some weight behind his hand and letting it go on with no letup. Finally the door swished open. McCoy's words of injured protest died as he took in the sight of Kirk who had just managed to catch the edge of his desk before he lost his balance completely.

"Jim..."

"I'm all right, Bones. Moving fast is difficult...."

"That buzzer rang for a solid minute. I'd hardly call that moving fast. Were you sleeping?"

"I think so," said Kirk as he carefully sat down.

McCoy looked at him skeptically. "You think so. Do you also think there is a possibility you ate today?" He knew the answer to that one and had come prepared. He injected some protein concentrate and high potency vitamins without waiting for a reply.

"Ow!"

"Don't you have any part of you that's not bruised?" asked McCoy with a touch of irony in his voice.

"Not that I've noticed recently," said Kirk with a small grin. He gently rubbed his arm as he spoke. McCoy watched as the amused expression died from Kirk's face.

"Uhura came to see me a couple of hours ago. Said you asked her to. Wasn't that a little underhanded?"

Kirk looked up at McCoy. "Sorry, I guess it was, but I knew you wouldn't yell at her and my head isn't up to much above a whisper."

"Jim, Starfleet asked you and Spock to go down to that city and 'evaluate' the situation. Do they have any idea what your medical status is?"

"They didn't when we talked to them, Doctor, but I'm sure that as soon as Uhura left you made sure they did." McCoy had the decency to look a little embarrassed.

"...and I'll bet it didn't accomplish a thing, did it?"

"No, they are evaluating my recommendation, which means they'll let me know their verdict after you finish whatever it is you need to do."

"Not me, Bones, the three of us." His fingers drummed lightly on the desk top as he spoke. "This has got to be one of the weirdest set-ups in the galaxy. The Klingons have an entire planet, we have a city. And we have an entire planet, and they have a city. Both are heavily populated. The Klingons run theirs like a military camp, we allow the same freedoms that are allowed on all Federation planets. The Klingons don't like it. Starfleet thinks they're planning to do something about it."

"So, what can you do?"

"Appeal to the Organians."

"Is that why you're evaluating?"

Kirk nodded. "This whole thing was their idea in the first place to prove our two peoples can live in peace."

"Jim, do you have any idea what will happen if the Klingons discover you? They won't even stop to ask questions this time. You've embarrassed them too often. The only condition they want to see you in is dead!"

"Bones, they aren't likely to find out we're there. We're going to be in a shuttlecraft as visitors on vacation. Uhura's going to stay in command, Scotty can help her if the need arises. The Enterprise will go on to Starbase 12 to get the engines repaired and Tracey into proper custody. We'll only be in Ber for a few days."

McCoy looked glum. "You're in no condition to do anything, Captain. I might consent to let Spock go but that would be under protest, too..."

"Relax, Bones, you're coming along to hold our hands. We'll be staying with John Starkney, a man I once knew at the Academy - he holds some minor official post on Ber now. We're going solely for rest and relaxation. By the time the Enterprise gets back we'll be as healthy as proverbial horses and hopefully have some information."

"I don't like it, Jim, but I've told that to everyone I can find and all that happens is that I get patted on the head and told not to worry. Well, I'll say it once more. I am worried, Captain, damned worried. You're

heading into a diplomatic hornet's nest!"

"Objection noted, Doctor, and I appreciate your concern. However, diplomats are rarely dangerous. All I ask is that you hold us together for as long as is necessary."



It had been a long time since Kirk had spent leisure time in a heavily populated city. His last few shore leaves had all managed to be spent on Starbases in long, boring conferences.

He looked around with interest as the aircar sped down the avenue. The tall buildings reached with graceful spires high into the strange yellow sky. The signs of prosperity were everywhere. He glanced at his companions. Spock was watching the passing scene with avid interest; McCoy's eyes were fixed on him. Kirk gave him a reassuring grin but it was not returned and he knew why.

His mind returned to the transporter centre. The three of them had beamed down from the shuttle port where they had left their craft along with the luggage they would need for their stay. And, as it had happened when they beamed back aboard the *Enterprise* from Omega IV, the dizziness and waves of nausea had been more than Kirk could manage. Quick movement from Spock had stopped him from falling and McCoy had pressed a hypo to his arm before he could protest.

"Jim, this is madness!" he hissed over the hypo. "Beam back up - you're not going to accomplish anything in this condition!"

Flashing hazel eyes had cut him off. Kirk was through arguing and McCoy knew it. Sighing to himself he put his hypo away and, gathering his suitcase, followed the others to the aircar.

After winding a dizzying route through the city, the aircar pulled up in front of an impressive looking home in a residential section. The trio gathered their belongings, paid the driver, then walked up and pressed the entrance bell. Pleasant sounding chimes sounded from within. They had only a momentary wait before the door in the archway opened and a youngish, dark-haired, very handsome man appeared.

"Jim!"

A hand came out ready to thump Kirk on the back. Before John Starkney had time to swing his arm, it was caught in a vice-like grip by the Vulcan standing at Kirk's side.

"What?!"

Kirk's eye caught Spock's and the Vulcan quickly let go. "Sorry, John," he apologized. "This is Mr. Spock, a friend, and it seems a protector at the moment. He's not accustomed to human behavior patterns...."

Starkney grinned as he rubbed his wrist, then held out his hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Spock. You don't have to worry about your friend, I won't hurt him." Spock shook hands, his dark eyes surveying the man standing in front of him until Starkney had the uncomfortable feeling that Spock could see to his very soul.

"This is Leonard McCoy," continued Kirk, turning towards Bones.

"The name's John. Come in, gentlemen, it's a rare treat to have friends drop by, especially from one's youth, however unexpectedly. This city is not a favorite place, being so close to the Klingon Empire."

They moved into the house as Starkney was talking and looked about appreciatively. It was built on many levels; no two rooms seemed to be on the same plane. Long, sloping ramps connected one room with another, and each room held what appeared to be a treasure trove of artwork and alien foliage. All bespoke of wealth - wealth that Kirk knew a man like Starkney did not possess.

"You have quite a touch, John."

"What, the house? Thanks for the compliment but I'm afraid it's Ruth's work, not mine."

"Ruth?" said Kirk, his eyebrows lifting.

"You know Ruth, Jim. She was a lab technician when we were at the Academy...." He did not notice the shadow that crossed Kirk's face, but Spock noticed it instantly and instinctively moved closer to his Captain. "Unfortunately she's visiting Earth at the moment with the kids. She'll be sorry she missed you. Come on, I'll show you to your rooms. The entire north wing is empty at the moment - you can come and go as you please, even do your own cooking if you want. I've got a housekeeper but I eat all my meals at the Federation commissary when Ruth's gone. Can't stand my own cooking." He chatted on as he led the way to the north wing, but no one was really listening. Spock and McCoy were mulling over Kirk's introduction. Kirk was far away in his thoughts, remembering Ruth, beautiful, china-fragile Ruth, his first great love.



They had three adjoining bedrooms which were built in a circular fashion, each beautifully furnished, with a huge kitchen and equally large bathroom in the middle. Starkney left them to their own devices, saying that he had to get to work.

They put down their suitcases and looked around. Kirk took the middle room, Spock and McCoy took the ones on

either side. As he unpacked, Kirk heard the sound of running water. He was just finishing up when McCoy came in.

"Your bath's ready, Jim."

"What bath?"

"The bath in which you are going to sit and soak that massive bruise you call a body. It's got a whirlpool attachment, it'll do wonders for your kidneys...." As Kirk opened his mouth to protest, McCoy cut in. "That's a medical order, Captain, not a request."

So, while Kirk soaked and the hot water swirled around his body, the three of them held a council of war.

"I've decided we'd better keep closed mouths as to what we're doing here," Kirk said, trying to ignore the foaming water as it tickled around his body. "If anyone asks questions, which I doubt, we're on vacation. Say nothing about Starfleet. I want to have the freedom to move around without rousing any suspicions."

"To search an entire city, Captain?"

"Probably not an entire city, Spock, although I'd like to do some exploring along the dividing line. I want to find out how many people are around who are trying very hard not to be Klingons. Spock, you'll need your tricorder for that - try not to be seen using it. Normal vacationers don't usually have sophisticated equipment like that. Between the three of us we ought to be able to come up with something."



Kirk lay face down on his bed, his head resting on his arms. There was something about this situation that made him uneasy, and he couldn't put his finger on it. gingerly he rolled over and got up, pulling on the long Vulcan robe that Spock had given him. Then quietly he made his way through the darkened house and out into the silent courtyard. Sounds of the nightlife of the city intruded little here in this peaceful place. Omega IV seemed a hundred light years away.

He moved out of the cover of the giant hybuk tree and stood looking at the stars. The two moons of Elgat were peeking up over the horizon. Although the setting could scarcely be improved upon, he still felt the call of the stars.

"Star light, star bright..."

The words startled him and his quick movement as he spun around shot stabbing pain all through him. His face grew visibly pale even in the dim light of the courtyard. Starkney was standing there, a speculative look on his face.

A sheepish grin crossed Kirk's face. "You startled me, John, didn't hear you come out."

"So I noticed." He glanced up at the sky. "The last time I saw you fifteen years ago you were staring at the stars, Jim. Haven't you had enough of them yet?"

"I take it that you have," said Kirk, avoiding the question without really knowing why.

"Dreams are for young men with visions. I live with reality now." He looked at the robe Kirk was wearing, the intricate design on the braid. "Vulcan, isn't it?"

Kirk nodded, saying nothing.

"You believe in their philosophy - logic, total peace and brotherhood?"

Kirk wondered what Starkney was leading up to. He opened his mouth to answer but Starkney continued.

"And that idea of theirs, IDIC, isn't that an impossible dream? Strength rules, Jim, not meekness."

"Nothing's impossible, John. You have to be open-minded. Surely as a diplomat you understand that necessity..."

Soft footsteps interrupted them and Spock appeared. He was dressed as was Kirk, the soft material of his dark blue robe flowing around his slender figure. He stopped slightly behind Kirk. Starkney eyed the two of them, not missing the fact that the design on both robes was identical. Being somewhat versed in Vulcan culture, the significance was not lost on him.

"Well," he said, "I've got to turn in. Big day tomorrow - planetary council meeting with the Klingons, guaranteed to be unpleasant. 'Night, Jim - Mr. Spock."

As Starkney disappeared into the house Kirk turned to the Vulcan with an amused look on his face. "Checking up on me, Mr. Spock?"

"Not precisely, Captain. However, I was aware of Mr. Starkney following you out of the house. He was in your room for several minutes before he came out into the garden. I presumed he was looking for you, but I wasn't sure. So I followed him."

Kirk turned and walked slowly to the hybuk tree, resting his hand on the rough-textured bark. "Spock, do you have any strange feelings about this place, this mission?"

Spock stood in silence. Kirk turned to him and what he saw in Spock's eyes disturbed him. "Are we really doing something stupid like Bones said? Should we contact Starfleet?"

The Vulcan's face remained expressionless, but the eyes were troubled. "And tell them what, Jim? Mr. Starkney

is the only lead we have and so far we have learned nothing from him. As yet I discern no danger," his voice grew very quiet, "...yet there is something...."

Kirk nodded slowly. "Yes, but what is it? I keep getting the feeling that someone is walking over my grave."

Spock's eyebrows rose. He had heard Kirk use a lot of strange expressions, but never that one. He didn't like the connotation.



"Jim, I think it's time you took a break," McCoy frowned as Kirk took absolutely no notice of him. He was standing behind the intricate fencing which barred contact with the lethal force field that the Klingons had built around two-thirds of the city - the area that bordered their territory. For as far as the eye could see there was nothing but barren wasteland on the far side of a busy city.

"Jim...." Gently McCoy took hold of Kirk's arm. "Come on, if you must stare there's a cafe across the street. You can stare from there and Spock will find us easily enough when he gets back."

Kirk gingerly leaned back in his chair, grateful to get the weight off his feet. His head and back were aching and he felt sick. They had covered practically the entire distance of the city's outskirts starting early in the morning. Now the sun was slowly sinking, turning the yellow sky almost amber. McCoy ordered dinner and got some soup and coffee for Kirk. When it arrived McCoy handed him a couple of pills.

"You've gone from paste to chalk, Jim. Take these. I don't relish the thought of carrying you home."

The pills disappeared, washed down with coffee. Kirk idly toyed with his soup as McCoy worked his way through his meal. He was just finishing when Spock arrived. His dark eyes surveyed Kirk.

And Jim thinks I'm a mother hen, thought McCoy to himself.

"Report?"

"Klingons, sir, a lot of them, all neatly disguised. I have tricorder readings."

Kirk sat moodily staring into the Klingon sector, his soup untouched, not noticing when the waiter refilled his coffee cup. Now things were starting to get serious; he could only hope that they wouldn't get rough. Spock ordered a small meal and ate in silence. Customers came and went, sparing an occasional glance at the three men.



A knock came at his door as he was getting dressed. Kirk called out for whoever it was to come in and continued to rummage through the closet. At length he found what he wanted and turned. Somewhat startled, he found himself face to face with Starkney whose eyes were taking in the massive bruises that covered Kirk's upper torso.

"I've been wondering why you were so pale, Jim. What on earth happened to you?"

"A minor philosophical disagreement with someone," Kirk said with a smile. "What can I do for you, John?"

"I'm having guests for dinner - some of the Ber council, a couple 'from the other side'. I was wondering if you and your friends would like to join us?"

Kirk slowly pulled a dark green tunic on over his head. His ribs were slowly healing, the pain wasn't quite so bad now when he lifted his arms. "Let me ask the others. I don't think we have anything planned and I know I'd like to come."



The last of the meal had been cleared away and the men settled themselves for drinks and serious talking. McCoy noticed that Kirk had again eaten virtually nothing and was now carefully nursing a liqueur - the thimblefull of liquid would probably keep him occupied all night. The slight flush on his face worried McCoy. Kirk had said nothing, but a glance told McCoy that the head injury was far from healed - the constant nausea Kirk was experiencing was a sure sign.

However, Kirk was chatting easily with Stanlau Pordy, assistant to the Grand Counsel, no sign of discomfort showing in his manner.

"I hear, Mr. Kirk, that you have been making quite a study of 'No Man's Way' the past few days." A deadly hush came over the group as everyone's attention riveted on Kirk.

He smiled easily. "An insatiable curiosity, sir. My job tends to be rather dull and predictable...." He deliberately refrained from looking at either Spock or McCoy. "I once had ambitions of a life in space, but like many of us...." he took a sip of his drink and waited until the liquid burned a path to his frighteningly churning stomach, "I was led astray into the humdrum existence that plagues most of us."

"And just what is that 'humdrum existence', Mr. Kirk?"

The Klingon spoke English with a thick accent. Kirk turned a placid face toward the speaker, his mind taking a giant leap ahead of his words. "Merchandising. Mr. Spock's family has been in trade for many years. We met some time ago, worked together, and eventually went into partnership, quite successfully if I may be allowed to boast."

"And what are you doing in Ber?"

"At the moment, sir," Kirk said with complete honesty, "absolutely nothing. It has been a long time since any of us had taken a real vacation. This is it. I knew John from our days at the Academy, before we both left. Actually, it wasn't until a few days ago that I realized that he had married a former fiance of mine...."

"And you, Mr. McCoy," said Pordy, "are you also in merchandising?"

McCoy glanced at Kirk before he answered, not too sure what the captain wanted him to say. "No, thank heaven, I'm a doctor - an old friend of Jim's. We occasionally get together for a short vacation. Matters as they are now with the business, I almost had to drag him away. He's been working far too hard recently...." McCoy hoped that his explanation would somewhat cover Kirk's appearance and obvious lack of appetite; he didn't know that Starkney had seen Kirk earlier. "And talking about being exhausted, I think he'd better get to bed." He got up, making it impossible for Kirk and Spock not to follow. They thanked their host, said goodbye to the others, and departed.

Spock helped Kirk undress, his eyes sober as he looked again at the swelling and bruises. He decided against talking to Kirk that evening. All during the meal he had remained silent, analyzing the newcomers and he was not at all happy with what he had seen. But nothing would come of it this night - Jim needed sleep, not additional worry.

McCoy came in, hypospray in his hand. Kirk was sitting on the side of the bed and McCoy gently pushed him down. His sensitive fingers probed the damaged area. He rolled Kirk over and ran his hand over the only slightly diminished swelling over his kidneys. Kirk lay quiet, occasionally wincing as the doctor's hand touched an exceptionally tender spot.

The hypo was pressed into the lower back muscles and the aching gradually lessened. Kirk sighed gratefully and rolled over to his back. McCoy pressed another hypo home.

"What's that for?"

"Sleep, Captain, that other body requirement you've been avoiding along with eating."

But Kirk's eyes were already closing. McCoy pulled up the sheet and blanket, then turned and looked at Spock.

"Come on, you're next."

A raised eyebrow met his statement. "I assure you, Doctor, I am--"

"Still suffering from the effects of that damned phaser. You're pale, your blood pressure is all screwed up, the pain level is still shooting off the scale. Don't give me that 'I'm perfectly all right, Doctor,' because you're not!"

McCoy led the protesting Vulcan to the next room. Within minutes he, too, was asleep.



Starkney sat staring at the tapes lying on the table in front of him. They contained no information that he hadn't already known, but he was starting to get a strange feeling about the men who were staying with him. There was a quiet knock on the door and a tall Klingon walked in.

"I came as soon as I got your call, John. What's wrong?"

Starkney handed him the tapes. "Nothing I can put my finger on, Krol, but I think we're heading for trouble. Read these."

Krol put the tapes into the viewer one by one.

"James T. Kirk. Born: Iowa, North America, Terra. Age: 34. Occupation: Merchant, based on Vulcan. Education: completed two years at Starfleet Academy, dropped out. Single. Mother living, father and brother dead."

"Spock. Born: Vulcan. Age: 41. Father: Ambassador. Mother: Teacher. Left post at Vulcan Science Academy to run family business. Single."

"Leonard McCoy. Born: Georgia, North America, Terra. Age: 46. Surgeon. Divorced. Wife and daughter still living."

Krol flicked off the viewer. "So? I see nothing unusual."

Starkney tapped his fingers on the table. "I spent my one year at the Academy with Kirk. He was the most brilliant and dedicated student that anyone had ever seen. Why would he drop out? It doesn't make any sense!"

Krol glanced back at the tapes. "Where did you get these?"

"Federation headquarters. They're authentic, all right. But there's something else that bothers me. I caught Kirk by surprise yesterday while he was getting dressed. Krol, his entire body is one great mass of bruises, as though someone had beat the hell out of him. If he's the businessman he claims to be, why would something like that happen? If he's in Starfleet, there's every possibility in the book...."

"If he's with Starfleet, then you're saying that you think someone's got wind of what we're planning...."

"Exactly."

Their eyes met, each knowing full well what had to be done - and quickly.

Krol got to his feet. "I think I know a way out of your dilemma, Starkney, at least a way to find out your

guests' real identities. Invite them to the next council session. After that we'll figure out what to do.



Kirk slept far into the afternoon. McCoy checked up on him several times but his sleep was deep and natural so he let him be. Spock had gone out early before McCoy had a chance to see him. He returned as McCoy was beginning to cook supper. The Doctor's practiced eye saw the tension as Spock worked to control his tired, protesting body.

"You look terrible!"

Spock threw him a disparaging glance but didn't bother to deny it. "How's the Captain?"

"He was asleep when I last looked at him. If you want to, you can wake him up. Dinner will be ready in a little while."

Spock knocked gently at the door but there was no response. He opened it and let his eyes adjust to the gloom before he entered the room. Kirk was lying on his stomach, the sheet covering only his lower body. Spock frowned, then moved forward and lightly touched Kirk's shoulder. Years of command training had taught Kirk to wake up instantly. He moved quickly, a low grunt escaping him as sore, stiff muscles were suddenly put into play. He gingerly sat up.

"Spock..."

"I did not mean to startle you, Jim."

"That's all right." He took in Spock's concerned face. "What's wrong?"

Spock sat on the edge of the bed looking uncomfortable. "Captain, after dinner last night I became somewhat suspicious of our host. Today I followed him. I have just left him in deep discussion with a Klingon...."

Kirk's eyebrows lifted but he made no comment.

"He pulled our files from the Federation Headquarters. He obtained the new ones that were planted, but I have the feeling that he does not believe their content...."

"A feeling, Mr. Spock?" said Kirk, a slight hint of amusement in his voice. He had no chance to go further as a knock on the door interrupted him.

"Just a minute...." He reached out for his robe as Spock got up to turn on the light. "Come in."

John Starkney strode in, the ever-present smile lighting his handsome face. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything, Jim, but I've got to go out tonight. Dr. McCoy said you and Mr. Spock were here and I wanted to catch you before I go. You expressed interest in attending one of the council sessions. We've got some interesting things on the agenda tomorrow and I was wondering if you would like to come as my guests?"

Kirk was aware of Spock's dark eyes as he quickly tried to decide what, if anything, was behind the invitation. He reasoned that nothing could happen in such an open place even if Starkney were involved in a Klingon conspiracy.

"Sounds good to me, John. Maybe I'll get some insight in how to handle bureaucrats!"

They laughed, then Starkney said goodbye and left. At about the same time McCoy hollered that dinner was ready. For the first time since they left Omega IV, Kirk finally ate some solid food. He didn't eat much, but it was a start.



The VIP chambers of the Ber council were quite an eyeopener, the plush furnishings and lavish wall hangings aesthetically appealing. McCoy looked around appreciatively. "I think I could put up with this for a while, Jim."

Kirk looked around. "The Federation certainly doesn't skimp when it comes to trying to impress the Klingons," Kirk agreed.

"A waste of time and effort, I would say, Captain."

"You would, Spock," said McCoy. "Why can't you just for once appreciate some luxuries? Oh, never mind - it's not worth trying to convince you..." He broke off as John Starkney came in accompanied by some of his co-workers. Introductions were made all round, then the others left to take their places in the open chamber below. Starkney pressed a button and a large curtain swung open, revealing the chamber, magnified through a viewing screen.

"This switch will open an audio channel to the council chamber, gentlemen. It's entirely one way so you can make any disparaging comments you wish without worrying about us hearing you." With a flashing grin, he was gone.

Kirk and Spock listened with interest to the debating that went on in the chamber. The longer he listened, the more convinced Kirk was that there was no way he could be successful in that line of work. Spock was mildly astonished that so much time could be taken to say so much that would accomplish as little. McCoy had quickly grown bored and had wandered off to look at the various paintings and art forms that decorated the room. Eventually Kirk got up to join him, his aching back making it impossible to sit still any longer.



Dark eyes followed Kirk's progress around the room. It had been over a year since he had last seen that figure, had faced that man, but there was no mistaking him. The image of James T. Kirk was indelibly imprinted on

Kor's mind, and this was indeed James Kirk standing in front of him. The last seated figure finally rose and turned; as Kor had expected, it was the Vulcan, Commander Spock, First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise. The third man Kor had not seen before.

He shut off the viewscreen and turned to Krol. "You have their identification tapes?" He studied them in silence, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth. The fates had willed him to be here - this time Kirk wasn't going to slip out of his hands.

"I wish to speak with Mr. Starkney when he is finished with his council session." Krol saluted and left. Kor flicked the viewscreen on again and sat back to watch.



Kirk yawned. It had been a long day and he was ready for bed. However, Spock was still out and he wanted to be sure the reports had been relayed to Starfleet. McCoy had gone out for a while after making sure that Kirk was settled for the night. Kirk tossed down the book he had been trying to read and got up. His hair was still damp from his shower and he had on his Vulcan robe. He padded through the house, intending to head out the front to see if Spock was coming. He flicked on the light and opened the door. The stunning bolt of a disrupter hit him square in the chest.



McCoy was singing happily to himself as he quietly let himself in. He had had a most pleasant evening and was feeling very mellow. He whistled softly as he made his way through the hazy darkness of the house. He had long ago lost track of time, but he knew Kirk and Spock would be asleep by now. He decided that he had better check on them.

He quietly opened Kirk's door, his cheerful mood quickly evaporating. Kirk's bed was empty and hadn't been slept in. He quickly moved across to Spock's room - empty. As he turned back, he was only momentarily aware of a figure standing there before the blue flash of a disrupter left him crumpled on the floor.



The floor was cold and clammy. He was lying uncomfortably on the hard surface, his hands securely tied over his head. The penetrating cold was hurting his swollen back, and he tried to shift to a more comfortable position. Impossible. The thin material of the robe was doing little to dispel his involuntary shivering.

He tried to look around but the blackness was complete. He called out but there was no answer. He tried to remember how he had gotten here but could remember nothing. He wondered where Spock and McCoy were. Had Spock managed to get through to Starfleet? Had anyone been there when Bones got home?

His mind refused to function and his body knew only numbing cold. Finally he passed out.



Spock stood silently in front of the curious dark eyes. He had been there for an hour now; before that in a small, dark room. He was not certain how he had been brought there. He remembered leaving Kirk at Starkney's house, heading off to send their report to Starfleet. He couldn't remember if he had sent the message; in fact, he could remember none of the events of the past few hours. He hoped that only he was being held by the Klingons, but that hope was illogical. If the Klingons were certain of his identity they would also know who Kirk was, and Kirk was the man they would mean to have.

"Commander Spock, this resistance is foolish. We know who you are. What we want to know is why your Federation records were falsified."

Spock continued to stare at the wall above the Klingon's head. A soft sound caught the Vulcan's ear and he glanced around to see a viewscreen flick into life. He looked at it dispassionately, no one else in the room aware that his insides had just twisted into a tight knot.

The image of James Kirk filled the screen. He was lying on a damp stone floor, only partially covered by the blue Vulcan robe. His hands were stretched above his head and shackled to the wall. He appeared to be unconscious, but his body was wracked by uncontrolled shivering. He was very pale except for a red flush on his face.

"Your Captain, Commander."

Spock turned back to the tall Klingon. "Mr. Kirk is a business associate, sir, nothing more. I do not see that your treatment of us is going to accomplish anything. I have nothing of interest to tell you, he certainly does not..."

"Are you sure, Commander?"

Spock felt his stomach lurch. He knew who spoke those words before he looked. Commander Kor was smiling broadly, then his eyes flicked over at the image of Kirk.

"I have seen your reactions before when your Captain was in trouble, Mr. Spock. This time there will be no interference on your part, or the Organians'...." He looked at Spock's face. "If you are wondering, you did not send your message to your Starfleet. However, a message was sent which will explain why you will not contact them

for several days. By the time their suspicions are aroused, we will have finished our work here and Elgat shall have total control over your city of Ber."



He paced the small room in every conceivable way and came up with the same few steps before running into damp stone walls. The available light was murky, coming in from some source high above his head. In the past few hours he had followed each stone with his fingertips trying to discover some sort of door or entrance to his prison, but he had found nothing. The incessant dampness was causing him to shiver despite his warm clothing. He wondered where Jim and Spock were. His head ached from the effect of the disrupter stun. Somehow, someone must have gotten wind of what they were doing. A chill ran down McCoy's spine, for once not caused by the cold. His premonition was coming true as a nightmare.



He was conscious when they came but too cold and numb to respond. As the bright lights flashed on he screwed his eyes shut, pain coursing through his head. His hands were unfastened and he was roughly pulled to his feet. He was shoved hard and stumbled forward, his back on fire and his body screaming with pain. By sheer will power he didn't fall, but only the total concentration of putting one foot in front of the other stopped him from passing out.

They arrived in a large, sparsely furnished room. There was a chair in the center with some sort of machinery attached to it. A hand was put on his shoulder preventing him from going any further. He braced himself, forcing slow, deep breaths, but his heart continued to pound like a trip-hammer. He didn't bother to look around, his head hurt too much to move. He concentrated his attention on the floor in front of him.

A Klingon activated the wall communicator. "We have him, Commander."

"Good. We shall be right there."

Kirk tried to concentrate. The voice sounded familiar but his mind wouldn't cooperate. He remained standing silently, then a noise distracted him and he looked up to Spock standing pale and quiet across the room from him. On each side stood a Klingon armed with a disrupter which was aimed directly at the Vulcan. Beside them stood the possessor of the now all too familiar voice - Kor.

"Do I have the pleasure of speaking to Baroner? Or are you Captain Kirk today? Perhaps you are a businessman from Vulcan. If nothing else, Captain, you have had a varied career."

If Kor expected an answer he received none. Kirk met his look squarely, without fear, but Kor noted that the defiance of their last meeting was absent and wondered why. He moved forward and rested his hand on the chair standing in the middle of the room.

"Do you remember our mind-sifter, Captain? No doubt your First Officer filled you in on the details of its operation...." Without turning, he spoke to Spock's guards. "If the Vulcan moves a muscle, shoot him!" Spock stood rooted to the spot, every muscle tensed for action. Only he saw the almost imperceptible shake of Kirk's head.

"Strip him!"

Kirk froze as he heard the words. Now the defiance appeared, the anger began to burn. He felt hands pulling at the blue robe, felt it pull away from his body. He shivered slightly but his burning eyes never left Kor's face. The proud stance never varied.

Kor's eyes noted the results of the severe beating. If the human was in pain, and he obviously had to be, he was not showing it. His already healthy respect for Kirk grew.

"I once asked you, Captain, for information and you refused. Is there any point in repeating it?"

"No."

"I thought as much. The Vulcan survived a Force Four probe. It will be interesting to see where you break. Put him in the chair!"

As though a silent message passed between them, Kirk and Spock tried to move closer, but it was doomed from the start. A crack on the head put Kirk on his knees; three Klingons pinned Spock against the wall. Kirk was dragged up and shoved into the chair. He struggled but was quickly strapped in. Spock watched in horror as the mind-sifter was turned on.

He would never forget the cry of pure agony as the alien machine ripped into Kirk's mind. The ancient violence of his heritage surfaced. He knew it was useless to fight the Klingons. If there was any hope at all to save Kirk, he would have to disable the mind-sifter. Two Klingons died before Spock had taken three steps. He reached the controls of the mind-sifter at almost the same moment the disrupter struck. He didn't slow down - the unhuman strength of his fury tore the metal apart. The weapon struck him again but he kept ripping and tearing, crushing to uselessness the dreaded machine. But not even Vulcan strength could withstand the third blast, and he fell forward

into the sparking, exploding machinery.



McCoy stopped his pacing as a grating sound caught his attention. From high above his head a strong light shone. As he watched in dawning horror, he saw Spock being shoved through the opening. He did his best to prevent a crashing impact with the stone floor. As he moved toward Spock, he saw Kirk being shoved in right behind, and the three of them landed in a heap on the rough floor. The light was abruptly cut off as the entrance was covered.

It didn't take McCoy long to discover he had real trouble on his hands. Spock was barely breathing and had severe burns on his face, chest and arms. His hands were torn, burned and bleeding. Kirk was deeply unconscious. McCoy stripped off some of his clothes and managed to work them onto Kirk's naked body. The heavy sweater, trousers and socks didn't exactly fit, but at least it was something. He smiled savagely at the image of himself in floppy tunic, underwear and boots, but at least he could move around a little in the limited space to try to keep warm. Carefully he pulled Spock to the driest part of the cell and laid him flat. He half-carried, half-dragged Kirk over to Spock and propped him up against the Vulcan. Their combined body heat was about the only thing he had to work with at the moment.



The hours passed in murky darkness, and McCoy continued his helpless vigil. Neither of the men had moved; there had been no sound from their captors. He spent his time briskly rubbing legs and arms, trying to keep bodies warm and circulation at least adequate. Taking care not to move Kirk's head, he vigorously rubbed his shoulders, thankful that Kirk's unconscious state would not allow him to feel the pain.

He was beginning to wonder if the Klingons were planning to starve them when a slit of light appeared from above and what looked like plastic tubes were tossed in. The light disappeared.

McCoy gathered the tubes and opened one. It held some sort of liquid and had a taste he had never experienced before. But any type of fluid would be better than nothing. He made reasonably sure that it was edible and wouldn't cause any wild reactions, then moved to Kirk and squeezed a little into the unconscious man's mouth. He moved his hand along Kirk's throat until he felt the automatic swallow reflex, then squeezed in a little more. It was a long, slow process.

Finally satisfied that Kirk had had enough, he moved to Spock and gently cradled the Vulcan's head in his lap. He winced as his hand came in contact with the burns. If they weren't treated soon, Spock was going to run a real risk of infection. He carefully slipped in the tube and squeezed some of the fluid into Spock's mouth. Fortunately he was ready for the gag reflex and sat Spock up, pushing his head between his knees. He held the shaking body close until the coughing had died, then pulled the badly weakened man back against him.

"That bad, Spock?"

Spock's eyes closed as a deep breath shuddered through him. McCoy picked up the tube. "Come on, take a little. Don't try to swallow, just let it melt." Little by little he got the liquid down Spock. He met no resistance and, to his surprise, Spock made no attempt to move out of his embrace. He lay like an exhausted child, reacting almost mechanically to McCoy's soothing voice. When the fluid was gone, McCoy continued to hold him close until the Vulcan again drifted off to sleep. Painfully moving his cramped legs, McCoy moved to check Kirk. The Captain was still unconscious, but the warmth of McCoy's clothing had brought his body temperature to a more normal level. Knowing he had done all he could for the moment, McCoy curled up beside Kirk on the cold floor and fell into a dead sleep.



"It cannot be repaired, Commander, the unit was completely destroyed before the Vulcan was stopped. We have no replacement here. We could send for another unit, but I do not know how long it would take to arrive."

Kor paced the room. "We may not have time. They are here under false identities which means that the Federation must know we are planning something. I must know what - and if they have contacted the Organians." He stood looking out the window at the bustling city in the distance. "This city of theirs, this Ber - they say it is proof of the freedom preached by their Federation. They hold it up as example - they force people to compare their ways to ours...." He turned and walked to a large map showing the Klingon territory. He tapped a small section of a planet on the very edge of the map.

"This is Ber - the one projection sticking out of our occupied territory. Colonized by the most stubborn, unreasonable people one could imagine. No matter what we've tried to do to get them out they won't go! Fighting doesn't work, Ber is too closely watched by the Organians who are ready on a moment's notice. Infiltration is the only way. It's taken two years to get everything set up! Only two more weeks and our takeover will be complete..." He turned back and stared at the twisted mess that had been the mind-sifter.

"How did Kirk know, and what does he know? I've got to find out!" He looked at his lieutenant. "I think it's

time we had another talk with our guests."



A fiery throbbing flowed through his veins. He groaned and opened his eyes but could not see clearly through the glare. He was roughly hauled to his feet and bit his lip to keep from crying out.

"This is the last of them."

He was roughly shoved up a ladder and hauled out into a large hallway, then half led, half carried to a large room. He pulled himself free of the clinging hands and walked in by himself. He saw Spock and McCoy standing in the middle of the room. Even with the seriousness of their position, he couldn't help but grin at McCoy's outfit. He had no way of knowing how much that smile meant to his friends.

They stood together, silent, waiting. And Kor left them waiting. McCoy cursed the Klingons as he watched his two friends hanging on to some last shreds of control. Then he saw Kirk's head lift in the defiant gesture he had seen so often, and he knew that someone important had arrived.

This time there was no nonsense. Kor went straight to the point. "Captain, we need to know and we need to know now what the Federation is planning." His eyes roved over the three men standing in front of him, pausing at McCoy's peculiar dress. "I know it will be impossible to get the information we need from the Vulcan, but this other man..."

"Is a doctor," Kirk broke in. "He is here because I had to be. He knows nothing, Commander. It's no use trying. The best information you might get would be the cure for Bysindian Blood Burn."

Kor's eyes flicked from McCoy to Kirk. "Which leaves you, Captain. You know the information I need. Could we possibly go about this in a civilized manner?"

Kirk's silence was his answer.

Kor finally lost his temper. "Take him!"

"Just a minute," blurted McCoy. "That man could die if you do anything more to him. He's got a fractured skull, he's suffering from the effects of a severe beating, and heaven only knows what you've pumped into him to get him standing again. When Starfleet..."

Kor snapped a look at McCoy. "Why would the Federation send in one of its elite leaders if they didn't think he was capable of successfully completing his mission, Doctor?"

McCoy fell silent. That was the one question which he also had been unable to get satisfactorily answered.

Kor turned to the guards. "Keep them here. If the Vulcan moves, kill him. I want no repeat of today's earlier incident."

Spock and McCoy stood helpless as they watched Kirk being shoved out the door.



Kirk remembered his Academy training, he remembered his oath, he remembered the thousands of lives which hung on his being able to resist the Klingon persuasion. He did nothing to resist and was far past being able to fight back. His eyes stayed glued on the far wall and he watched as it stood out in sharpness, blurred, whirled in circles, turned a reddish hue; forced himself to concentrate on it, never letting his mind wander from knowing its exact distance. Even when he could no longer stand, he kept his eyes glued on the wall until it, along with the incredible pain, were the only real things left in his world.

He didn't remember passing out, but opened his eyes to see the cool gray floor against his face. Vaguely he felt himself being pulled back onto his feet. He forced his eyes up - and looked into the face of the one man he knew could not bear to witness these happenings. McCoy's ashen colour told Kirk he had seen far too much.

The hands holding him let go and he staggered forward a couple of steps before he managed to catch his balance. He pressed a hand over his eyes trying to control the terrible waves of nausea that were sweeping over him; when he lowered his hand he was not surprised to see it covered with blood. The clothes that McCoy had given him were hanging like rags. Steeling himself, he turned to face Kor.

"It was not necessary to have McCoy witness this, Kor. He knows nothing and you know I won't talk."

Kor nodded. He had hoped that the shock of seeing McCoy's face would weaken Kirk, but his plan had failed. This human had a stubbornness Kor had not realized the species possessed. He signalled to the guards who brought Spock in from the other rooms. The Vulcan's eyes narrowed as he took in the bloody sight of his Captain.

"Put them back in their cell."

Kirk felt a strong arm circle his waist and he thankfully put his arm around Spock's shoulder. He wasn't going to try to pretend he could make it on his own. Kor didn't bother to watch them leave - he had more pressing commitments elsewhere, and had done as much with the Federation men as he could.

Kirk estimated the fall to be about six feet. He landed in an awkward tangle of arms and legs, half underneath Spock. McCoy managed to push off the wall and land across the cell from them, and he quickly moved over to where

Kirk and Spock were painfully trying to untangle themselves.

He sat back on his heels and whistled softly under his breath. There was hardly a spot on Kirk's body that wasn't bruised or bleeding. Carefully he took off what was left of Kirk's clothing, then pulled off his own tunic and undershirt. Without hesitation Spock did the same. While the Vulcan tore material into long strips, McCoy bound up the worst of Kirk's wounds. Over Kirk's protests, he pulled the tattered sweater back over the Captain's head, then sat back and observed his two friends.

"Quite a sight," he said ironically.

"May I return the compliment," said Kirk. "If my head didn't hurt so much, I'd laugh." He glanced around. "We've got to get out of here and back to a place where we can contact Starfleet. I think what we've seen and experienced here has more than given us proof that the Klingons have infiltrated the Ber Council. If that council selects the Klingon rule, there's nothing the inhabitants can do about it. Those men were freely elected - we can't go back on our word that we would let the city choose its own way."

McCoy broke in angrily. "What we've seen and experienced? Jim, both you and Spock could easily be dead before we get out of this, if we do get out...."

Kirk smiled gently, appreciating the concern that McCoy hadn't mentioned. "That's why we're here, Bones. We needed proof, now we've got it. The Enterprise was the closest ship to Ber - our lives mean very little compared to what Ber means to freedom, and the meaning of freedom. We left you in the dark deliberately, Doctor, in case we ended up in a position like this." His eyes narrowed as he fought against the pain. "I'm telling you now because you may very well be the only one of us to get back. I'm not sure how much farther I can go...."

"Don't talk rubbish, Jim. We'll get back."

Kirk's sad smile told McCoy his words were accepted with skepticism, but a light touch from Spock's hand let him know that either all or none of them would return. Kirk sighed, knowing that he would have to keep fighting, still momentarily wishing he could just dump the whole burden in someone else's lap.

Spock, with McCoy's help, got Kirk into a more comfortable position, then he proceeded to survey their cell inch by inch. He finally stood looking up at the area where they had entered. Standing on his toes, he could not get a firm grip to raise himself.

"I'm not a very sturdy table, Spock," said McCoy, "but I'm willing to try." Spock silently accepted McCoy's offer and within minutes had the opening loose. He poked his head out and saw only an empty corridor. He put as much weight on his hands and arms as he could, gritting his teeth as his full weight came down on painful burns. With a surprisingly strong shove from McCoy, he scrambled out. McCoy boosted Kirk up as high as he could, but it wasn't enough.

"Spock, I can't help you. Maybe you should leave me here, try to get back after you've contacted Starfleet..."

Spock didn't even try to dignify Kirk's statement with an answer. He reached down and locked fingers with Kirk, literally pulling him up and out of the cell. He looked mutely at the mingled red and green blood and for the first time found himself wondering if they really would get out of this alive.



It seemed to take forever to get out of the building. No one appeared to be on the alert - obviously they had been dismissed for more important matters. Long minutes of hiding silently in corridors and unused rooms were punctuated by short movements and lots of backtracking. Most of the passages didn't seem to lead anywhere. Spock went first, McCoy helped Kirk. The latter moved with clenched teeth and dogged determination. He wasn't going to pass out - the thought repeated over and over in his mind.

They were crouching in a small recess when Spock came back. "We'll have to wait for nightfall, Captain. We would be far too conspicuous going out now." He looked around. "We are probably safest here. I doubt if the Klingons can put their plan into operation before morning. The Enterprise is due to come into orbit within a few hours. I suggest we rest while we can."



McCoy woke from a fitful sleep, and glanced across at the others. Spock was leaning up against the wall with Kirk held protectively in his arms, the tousled brown hair askew on Spock's shoulder. Kirk had his face half turned, buried against the Vulcan's chest, his arms encircling Spock's waist. Spock's dark eyes were resting on Kirk's face. The slow rise and fall of Kirk's chest told McCoy that Kirk was deeply asleep.

Spock glanced up, seeing that McCoy was awake. "It is time to move on, Doctor."

As McCoy nodded, Spock gently woke Kirk. Pain suffused Kirk's face as his eyes opened, and his fingers dug deeply into Spock's arm as it momentarily overwhelmed him. Spock watched helplessly - he was too badly injured himself to be able to help his Captain cope with the pain. McCoy cursed that he didn't have his medi-kit; he could at least have relieved some of Kirk's suffering. Before he could move to help, Kirk sat up.

"Ready to go?" The pale, damp face showed the effort that move had cost, but neither Spock nor McCoy commented. There was nothing their words could accomplish.

They slipped out of the building and kept to the shadows in the street. Kirk suddenly stopped as he caught sight of an aircar.

"Jim, we need something to get us over the force field, or out into orbit. That aircar is not capable of it." "Agreed, Spock, but if my hunch is right, that aircar will lead us to bigger and better things."

"And more trouble," mumbled McCoy as he followed the other two across the street.

Spock glanced inside. "The ignition is locked, Captain."

"I'll have it started in a jiffy, Spock. Get in and keep the brake on. I don't want to get run over. Bones, be ready to give me a hand here. Once I get under this thing I don't think I'll be able to get out without help."

Within seconds the aircar roared to life. McCoy pulled a swearing Kirk out from under the car and boosted him into the pilot's seat, hopping in behind. As soon as he was in, they were airborne.

"That was an interesting demonstration, Captain," said Spock. "I don't remember that being taught at the Academy."

Kirk smiled. "I learned that long before the Academy, Mr. Spock. My brother would never let me have the keys to the aircar at home, so I just found other ways of getting it to go." He grinned at Spock's expression. "Now, where would you suspect they moor their shuttles?"

A Vulcan eyebrow lifted. "I would imagine somewhere near the building we just left."

"Agreed. Let's go look."

"Jim, we can't outrun a shuttlecraft in an aircar. Don't be insane!"

"I'm not, Bones. Hang on to your seat, I have a feeling we're going to be knocked out of the air none too gently."

After searching for a bit, they found what they were looking for and buzzed the shuttlecraft port. An angry Klingon voice demanded something over the audio, and although they didn't understand the language, the meaning was clear. When they ignored the order, one of the craft took off.

"Hang on, this is going to be a rough trip!"

Kirk's words hung heavy in the air. Spock watched him with concern as the aircar spun and pivoted out of the way of the larger, faster ship. He knew Kirk was attempting to get the two craft to open country before being forced to land; he also knew that the human wouldn't be able to take the violent lurches of the small craft for very long in his present condition. McCoy clung grimly onto his seat and prayed.

The shuttle finally swung around and hit the aircar head on, causing Kirk to lose control. Spock made a desperate grab for the controls but they were dead. He yelled for McCoy to lie flat, then grabbed Kirk and braced for the crash.



Everything was silent as the two Klingons approached the wreckage. There was no answer to their hail, only tiny wisps of smoke rising from the shattered paneling moved in the still air. They pulled out their disrupters and ducked into the smashed craft.

As one of them bent over McCoy's prone figure, Kirk's foot shot out and caught him hard in his lower back. As the Klingon fell forward, McCoy spun around and laid him flat with a karate chop. The second Klingon was being gently laid down by Spock, his hand still gripping the Klingon's neck. Kirk looked at the small silver craft standing close to their own vehicle.

"Our transportation, gentlemen."

McCoy looked at Kirk in horrified anger. "Jim, do you have any idea how close you came to being dead? How close all of us came?"

"Don't start yelling yet, Bones, we're not home free until we get back to the Enterprise. Come on..." He took two steps and collapsed to his knees.

McCoy was beside him instantly. "See what I mean, you crazy fool?"

"All right, I'm not arguing. Spock, take over. We've got a rendezvous to make and we've got to manage it without being blown out of the sky..."

"Why on earth would the Enterprise shoot at us?" asked McCoy in astonishment.

"Because, Doctor," said Spock with the infinitely patient tone he used whenever he thought McCoy was acting like an ass, "we are in a Klingon shuttlecraft coming straight at them. What would you think? We haven't been heard from. Lt. Uhura was told we would report in no matter what the circumstances unless we were captured or killed. Do I make myself clear?"

"Too clear, Mr. Spock," said McCoy glumly.

Spock and McCoy helped Kirk into the shuttlecraft. The Captain and Spock spent a few minutes discussing the different instrumentation, then Kirk sat back.

"Spock, you take her up. Once we're in space I'll take over and you get working on communications...."

"What can I do, Jim?" asked McCoy, feeling a little useless.

"You, Doctor, can keep me from passing out. Everyone ready?"

They reached orbiting position with little trouble. Spock turned the controls over to Kirk and attacked the communications set-up. It was channeled to reach Empire ships, not those of Starfleet. McCoy kept a grim eye on Kirk who was growing ever weaker and starting to slip into shock from loss of blood.

They had been flying for almost two hours when Kirk broke the silence. "There's the Enterprise.

They all drank in the sight of the silver ship floating in stately grandeur ahead of them.

"How are your communications coming, Spock?"

"A few more minutes, sir."

"Better hurry, they're swinging around to meet us."

McCoy watched as the ship started closing the distance between them. He noted that Kirk kept flying a steady course right for her. "Well," he thought, "the Enterprise will get us, one way or the other."

Suddenly the silence was broken. "Spock to Enterprise, Spock to Enterprise. Come in..."

The voice that answered was weak and crackling but no less beautiful for it. "Enterprise, we hear you, Mr. Spock."

Spock's eyes met Kirk's and he handed the instrument to the Captain.

"Enterprise, this is Kirk. Three to beam aboard...."

Uhura's voice sounded stronger and Kirk had the suspicion that the break in her voice was not caused solely by the altered connection.

"Aye, sir, the transporter is locking on to you..."

Kirk turned to McCoy. "Doctor, I'm not even going to pretend this time. When we materialize I am going to fall flat on my face and I don't think I could stand another bruise!"

McCoy's blue eyes twinkled. "Don't worry, Captain, I think somehow Spock and I will be able to hold you up."



Commodore Stone was waiting for them. He hadn't seen them since Kirk's court martial more than two years earlier. Then he had almost been forced to break for negligence a man he admired more than anyone he had ever met; now, sitting at the briefing room table was this same man who had suffered such incredible torture and brutality both from the Klingons and one of his own peers, yet he was still able to give a clear, full account of the treason and treachery they had discovered in Ber.

When Kirk finished, everyone was silent. As Stone switched off the recorder his brown eyes sought Kirk's, not missing the injuries, the bloodstained rags that he was wearing and the deathly paleness. Yet Kirk had insisted on this debriefing. He looked at Spock sitting silently at Kirk's side just as he had before in his courtroom. The Vulcan's clothes were not quite the rags that Kirk wore, but the severe burns were mute testimony to his suffering.

"Gentlemen, the Federation owes you a debt it will never be able to repay. Those in the conspiracy will be severely punished. Ber will continue as a living monument to freedom because of your actions...."

McCoy came in, looking remarkably better in uniform than he had in that most unusual combination of clothing he had been wearing when the three men had beamed aboard. "Your time is up, Commodore. These men have got to get to sickbay!"

"Of course, Doctor, we are finished." He stood, bowed formally to Kirk and Spock and left, followed by his yeoman.

Spock slowly rose, finally letting his pain and fatigue show now that Stone had left. Kirk put his hands on the table in front of him. He sat for a moment, then looked up at Spock.

"I can't...."

Brown eyes darkened as Spock stepped forward and gently put his hands under Kirk's arms, guiding him to his feet, supporting his weight as he realized that Kirk could no longer do it for himself. Not taking his eyes from Kirk's face he spoke to McCoy.

"Doctor, the corridor..."

Nodding, McCoy left. Spock gently moved his arms around Kirk's body for additional support. Kirk looked at him and Spock saw his eyes mist with tears.

"I've destroyed Starkney, Spock - have I destroyed Ruth as well?" Spock had forgotten about the fragile woman whom Kirk had once loved. He opened his mouth to answer but at the same moment Kirk turned his face away and took a shuddering breath, struggling to regain control.

"I didn't think we would make it this time, Spock. Our luck's got to run out one of these days...."

Spock felt Kirk's body start to go limp and he gently raised the human, cradling him in his arms as he braced himself against the table. The hazel eyes slowly closed, bringing the long lashes down onto the now damp and fever-flushed cheeks. Kirk had finally given in to the consuming pain of his body. For a moment Spock stood holding him, Kirk's words ringing in his ears. Only once before had he ever heard Kirk mention death, and that had been in anger. This time his voice sounded...different. Was it pain, or did Kirk feel that same awful dread that the Vulcan experienced each time he watched Kirk face possible death?

He touched his cheek to the silken hair. "Jim, one day that extraordinary thing you call luck will run out. My only wish is that if it must happen, it will come to us both, together."

Later, he did not remember if he'd spoken aloud.

He looked up to see the open door, and beyond it McCoy and the now empty corridor. He didn't stop to wonder how long the doctor had been standing there. Silently he carried the unconscious body of his Captain to sickbay, then lay and watched McCoy work his life-saving miracles before he would let M'Benga treat him. Finally he sank into his own healing oblivion.

Musings

Thirty-four.

Why me?

A question asked,
As yet unanswered.

Many aspire to command,
Merrick, Finney - yet I stand
here,
Feeling no, not fear.
Just perhaps a sense of awe.

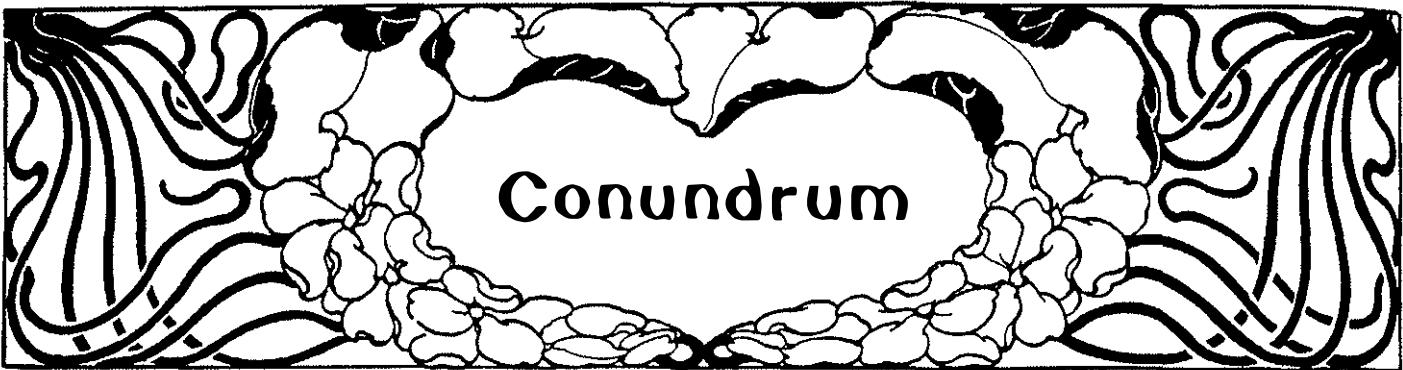
This thing, this ship, this Enterprise,
Have I the right to call her mine?
Is this what beckons men to rise?
Yet, Spock once told me it is the man,
not the ship,
Without that man, the loyalty dies.

And how often has he proven his -
A touch, a glance, a word.
How little he shows to the outside world
of his strength, his needs, and his love.
He had that once, he gave in to his heart,
He actually did belong.
Then through a storm of tears, Leila shared with me,
High above Omicron Ceti Three
That Spock had a responsibility -
To the ship,
And to me.

McCoy understands, it's a lonely street,
And he does his best to help.
He gives his advice and listens to fears,
Though if I make him beam down one more time I'm afraid
Another ship's surgeon may be coming my way.
Yet, in a moment of doubt when this question was asked,
He answered directly - he did not shirk,
"...Don't destroy the one named Kirk."

To Scotty the ship is more than a home,
It's a friend - a child who needs care.
Uhura and Chekov and Sulu and all
This crew, these people - so rare.
Yet why, once again, am I the man at the top?
A lieutenant once, young, small and scared.
How they look to me
And what do they see?

A man
Just like them,
A bit older than before,
A bit wiser, more human? Who knows?
But being of command grade
I guess here I shall stay
And wonder - maybe pray,
Why me?



Conundrum

"Spock...?"

"Uh?"

Kirk glanced up at the uncharacteristic response from his first officer and smiled fondly. Spock's attention was concentrated upon the computer readout in front of him.

"I'm thinking of blowing up the Enterprise. What would you suggest as the most efficient method?"

"Probably causing the antimatter to mix with..." Spock's head jerked up, and Kirk met the Vulcan's puzzled expression with a wide grin.

"Well, at least I've got your attention," he said. "Now I need your opinion..."

The two of them were alone in Briefing Room four. It was very late and most crewmembers from their shift were long since in bed. Spock was working on an experiment that was taking all his free time, and Kirk had discovered that if he wanted to see the Vulcan at all outside of duty hours, he had to spend his time here.

"My opinion on what, Captain?"

"These orders from Starfleet concerning Platan VII. How many planets were visited by Terrans before Starfleet and its hands-off policy came into being?"

Spock looked thoughtful. "I doubt if I could answer that accurately. Earth has sent out space probes for the past couple of centuries..."

"And it's a documented fact," said Kirk, "that not all of those ships were attached to a space agency. There were a few ambitious privateers among them..."

"Which is why Starfleet is concerned that accidental interference might have occurred."

Kirk grinned. "Well, nothing's been as funny as what we found on lotia. I sometimes find it hard to believe that one book could create such a complex society. Still, they were pretty well organized."

Spock looked longingly at the computer, then back up at Kirk. "You said you wished my opinion on something, Captain."

"Did I?" Kirk asked innocently. "Guess I really just wanted to talk."

Spock looked back at the computer, then switched it off. "Would you like to do so over a game of chess?"

A slight, wistful smile touched Kirk's face. "Yes, I would - but you wouldn't. I won't take you away from your work. Besides, I've got to get to bed. I'll be leading a landing party tomorrow while you sit up here with your nose buried in the computer." He got to his feet. "I'll see you when I get back. Goodnight, Spock."

"Goodnight, Jim. Sleep well." Before the door closed behind Kirk, Spock's attention was once again focused on his work.

The next morning Kirk, an anthropologist, and four security guards beamed down to Platan VII. Kirk called in to say they had arrived with no problems. Then the entire landing party disappeared.



Exhaustion was etched deeply into the faces of all the bridge personnel save one. Spock, bent in total concentration over the sensors, looked no different than he had 57 hours earlier when the search for the missing landing party had begun. And it was his relentless drive that now kept everyone else on their feet. His refusal to give up gave everyone else a ray of hope.

Guilt drove Spock. He should at least have accompanied Kirk, if not headed the expedition himself. A science officer had been needed more than command personnel, but Kirk, knowing how preoccupied Spock was with his computer project, had not even suggested that his first officer accompany him. This was the sort of assignment Kirk relished,

and it was a rare occasion that he did not get an argument from Spock concerning the risks of the unknown.

"Anything, Spock?" The soft drawl of McCoy's native South was broad with exhaustion.

"Negative, Doctor." Spock did not take his eyes from the readout as the scanners swept across the surface of the planet.

"Search parties?"

"They have beamed back aboard. The area where they materialized is one vast swamp. It is impossible to search on foot. We must rely on other means."

"Surely it must be possible to locate Human readings down there!"

"Ionic interference prevents positive identification, Doctor. We could easily beam up beings native to the planet, and that would violate the Prime Directive. Starfleet would..." He broke off, his attention completely absorbed by what the computer was relaying. His fingers flew across the controls, checking and verifying the readout. He finally sat down and activated the intercom.

"Mr. Scott, please report to the transporter room. I think I have found them." Spock listened with half an ear to Scott's hasty acknowledgment, then looked up at McCoy. "Doctor, I believe your presence would also be beneficial. I shall remain here to monitor the Human life-forms on the planet's surface."

"Are they...?"

"There are six life readings, Doctor."

"How did you locate them?"

Spock's eyebrow quirked slightly. "They have returned to their original beamedown point, which was chosen for its relative isolation from settlements populated by the planet's humanoid inhabitants. The captain must have realized that it would be easiest for us to distinguish between similar readings at that site." He turned back to his board and was relaying the coordinates to Scott as the turbolift doors closed behind McCoy's retreating figure.

Spock arrived in the transporter room to find McCoy running a scanner over Kirk's unmoving, mud-encrusted body. He quickly moved forward and helped Scott get Kirk onto a waiting medical gurney. The other members of the landing party, although as filthy as their commanding officer, did not seem the worse for wear.

"What happened to him?" McCoy's voice was slightly unsteady as he read the scanner. He felt sick as he listened to McMaster's brief report. Glancing once at Spock, at the impassive face and pain-filled eyes, he was almost grateful for the Vulcan's control. He had more than enough on his hands as it was.



After the members of the landing party got cleaned up, they were ordered to meet with Spock in briefing room six. Lt. McMaster did most of the talking.

"We found no obvious cultural contamination, Mr. Spock. Their society is relatively primitive. We tried to avoid making any contact with the natives, but it was difficult. They seemed to be everywhere."

"Can you describe the inhabitants?"

"They're all dark-haired with dark complexions. Their language was similar enough to Standard for us to understand them, but I'm not sure they could understand us."

"Contamination?" asked Spock.

"A possibility, sir," McMaster replied.

"What happened to the landing party?"

"It was the natives, sir. They spotted Kerber first," McMaster said, gesturing at one of the security guards. "Before we could make a run for it, we were surrounded. That's when..." The man paused, obviously reluctant to continue.

"That's when what, Lieutenant?"

McMaster swallowed hard. "That's when they first saw Captain Kirk. They all stared and pointed at him, then started jabbering something about someone named 'Gregory' and how he brought death."

"'Gregory'?"

"I couldn't make sense out of it. Maybe it was Captain Kirk's appearance. The rest of us have darker complexions and hair."

Recognition? thought Spock. Who or what did Jim remind them of?

"Anyway, they indicated he had to go with them. When he started to refuse, they threatened to kill all of us, so he went. We saw a little of what happened. They...they stripped him, then beat him unmercifully. We tried to get free to help him, but they had us penned up and there was nothing we could do. We pleaded with our guards, but they said he was not going to be allowed to 'kill as he did before'. It didn't make any sense."

Spock made a mental note to check back into the little knowledge they had of Platan history to see if he could find out what circumstances might have given rise to such a reaction. "What happened then?" he asked, not wanting

to know.

"They staked the captain out in the middle of a stinking mud pit. There were insects everywhere, and he was quickly covered with them. He was twisting and thrashing - they must have been stinging him. The natives all sat around drinking, even our guards. It must have been pretty potent stuff because they gradually disappeared into their huts..." He faltered, the memory of what had happened almost more than he could handle. With outward patience, Spock waited for him to continue.

"Somehow Captain Kirk managed to free himself and crawled over to where we were being held. He was so weak that he couldn't stand on his own. He fell into our arms when he got the gate open. We gave him what little water we had, tried to clean the insects out of the wounds left by the beating...but he insisted we get out of there before the natives came back. He couldn't walk at first, so we carried him."

Spock nodded, his face not revealing his inner turmoil.

"After a short time, the captain insisted on trying to walk by himself. He headed off into the swamp with such determination that we all followed without hesitating. The stinking mud was often waist-deep, but he hardly even stopped to rest. He knew exactly where he was going. We just hoped he'd get there before he died. Then the ship found us, and here we are."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Spock. "Does anyone else have anything to add?" No one did, but Spock asked each of them to log a personal report of their experiences on the planet. Then he ordered them off-duty to get the rest they needed. Finally he headed for the Sickbay...and Kirk.

McCoy and Chapel were working in silence. Kirk had been thoroughly washed; the revolting mud of the swamp was only a memory. Although they had been working for some time, the evidence of the natives' brutality stood out clearly.

"Massive infection," McCoy informed briefly, meeting Spock's eyes. The doctor was carefully cleaning each wound before sealing it - a painstaking, slow job. "I've pumped him full of antibiotics - still best against this type of thing..." He broke off at a small gasp from Kirk. "Five cc nurin, Christine."

Spock's eyes narrowed. Nurin was a powerful painkiller. McCoy stopped working while Chapel administered the shot. When he had waited a few minutes to allow the medication to take effect, the doctor picked up the scanner and let it run until the indicator stabilized at a decreased pain level.

"He's semiconscious, Spock," McCoy explained. "I don't dare put him under. He might not be strong enough to stand it." He put the scanner down and started to work again.

Spock stood frozen as he viewed Kirk's agony. He knew McCoy was doing all he could, but it wasn't enough. Finally he stepped forward and took Kirk's hand. McCoy glanced up but didn't say anything. Kirk's hand, like the rest of his body, was sweat-soaked from shock and pain. Spock took hold with both hands so it wouldn't slip. An answering pressure met his, then changed into a painful grip as McCoy's probing instruments ran through an infected wound.

"Doctor..."

McCoy finished sealing the wound, then turned weary eyes to Spock. "What?"

"His pain. I could lessen its intensity. Perhaps it would strengthen him."

McCoy stood silent for a moment, then nodded. "All right. I need a break anyway, and so does he. I'll be back in a minute."

Spock freed one hand, although he let Kirk maintain his desperate grip on the other. He felt for the familiar touch-points on Kirk's face, braced himself to receive the pain he knew was coursing through Kirk's body, and opened his own mind.



When McCoy returned to Sickbay, he wasn't sure who looked worse; the Human lying on the bed or the Vulcan standing by his side. "Spock?" he ventured softly.

"He is stronger, Doctor."

McCoy looked doubtful, but picked up his instruments and went back to work. And this time, Kirk did not flinch at his touch. Instead he lay still, eyes closed, his hand still tightly holding the Vulcan's. Spock made no attempt to pull away, although the bloodless tips of his fingers gave mute testimony to the painful intensity of the Human's grip.

Finally, McCoy laid down his instruments for the last time, checking the chronometer as he did so. He had been working on Kirk for three hours. He glanced at Spock, who was standing in rigid silence. "That's got all of them," he said. "They should heal with no complications." He looked at the panel above Kirk's head and frowned. The readings showed an advancing internal infection. He drew some blood, then turned to Spock. "Stay with him. I'll be back."

For a few minutes Spock stood in silence watching his captain. Kirk's breathing was labored and his face was flushed by the fever that raged through him. Spock started to remove his hand from the Human's, only to have Kirk clasp it more tightly.

"Jim," he said gently, "I'm not leaving you. I am going to get a chair. I shall be gone only a few seconds." He waited until Kirk slowly loosened his grip, quickly retrieved a chair, then sat down and took Kirk's hand again.

McCoy was gone a long time. Kirk lay silent and unmoving, only his grip on Spock's hand telling the Vulcan that he was still partially conscious. Spock kept his answering pressure constant so that Kirk would know he was not alone. Twice a nurse came in and administered a hypo. When Spock questioned her, he was told that the injection contained more high-powered antibiotics to combat the infection.

Spock's first warning of trouble came shortly after Kirk had received the second injection. The pressure of the Human's grip increased rapidly, until Spock's hand was being clutched with desperate strength. Kirk's body tensed, his face grew very pale, and suddenly he was gasping for breath, seemingly unable to get any air.

Spock disentangled his hand and ran for the intercom. "Spock to McCoy - emergency!" While he was speaking, Kirk's whole body went rigid, arching up off the diagnostic bed. Spock rushed back to Kirk's side, firmly holding the Human's shoulders down as the convulsion worsened.

"What the hell!" McCoy's words almost preceded his arrival. His scanner flew over Kirk's writhing figure. His expression, if possible, was more grim than it had been earlier. "Oh god, no," he said in a choked voice. "Not that..."

A tremor of fear ran through Spock as he watched McCoy. "What is wrong?"

"He's been getting tetrathipile, a new 'wonder drug' - and, damn it all, he's allergic to it!" The doctor was busy injecting Kirk with muscle relaxants to control the spasms wracking his body. Then McCoy yelled for Christine Chapel, the volume and tone of his voice making the intercom entirely unnecessary. Her face paled as he quickly filled her in on the situation.

"Benedryl and epinephrine, 5 cc each - stat!" McCoy ordered. "Then get some 5% prednisone on a metered IV hypospray, 15 mg per hour."

Minutes later, Kirk was securely restrained, and antihistamines were being pressured into his arm.

"I want you to stay with him, Nurse. I'll be right back."

"Yes, Doctor."

"Spock, come on." McCoy's eyes softened as he saw Spock's reluctance to leave Kirk's side. "He doesn't know we're here now, Spock. Save yourself for the time when he'll need you."

McCoy led Spock out of the room and waited for the door to shut before he spoke. "Things like this shouldn't happen in this day and age," he finally burst out in frustration. "But we can't predict their occurrence. Antibiotics are life-savers 99% of the time. Starfleet issued tetrathipile a few months ago, and it's the most effective antibiotic I've ever used. Practically the entire crew got it when we had that run-in with the unidentified bug on Catson II. Jim was one of the ones treated." The doctor took a deep breath. "That must have partially sensitized his system to the allergen. And the injections we gave him earlier finished the job. I'm guessing that the most recent dose of tetrathipile triggered the reaction."

Spock nodded, remembering the sequence of events that had preceded Kirk's symptoms. "I have little knowledge of such reactions," he said, "but wasn't this one unusually severe and sudden?"

"It'd progressed to anaphylactic shock," McCoy explained shortly. "Abdominal pain, upper respiratory distress, severe agitation, convulsions..." Sensing Spock's thoughts, he added, "There was no way you could have anticipated the onset, Spock. Jim was only semi-conscious, and the early symptoms wouldn't be detectable unless you were specifically looking for them."

"Is it...?"

"It could kill him," McCoy admitted, too upset himself to spare the Vulcan. "All sorts of complications are possible: cardiac arrhythmia or arrest, lung collapse, hemorrhaging, kidney failure, liver damage. It depends on the severity of the reaction. The antihistamines he's getting will combat the cause of the shock, but he'll continue to have breathing difficulty, sweating, and weakness until we get it under control. That, plus the fact that we've got to keep treating the massive infection he already had..." He shook his head. "I honestly don't know if it's going to be possible to keep him stable." McCoy put a restraining hand on Spock's arm; the Vulcan had started to move back toward the isolation unit where Kirk was being treated. "Spock, don't."

"Doctor, I..."

"That's an order from the Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise, Spock. Only qualified medical personnel are to be in there until we get this under control!" He moved across the room to stand in the Vulcan's path. "It's going to be touch and go, Spock, a difficult fight. It's got to be waged by experienced people."

For a moment only icy coldness met McCoy's gaze. Then Spock lowered his eyes. "Understood, Doctor. I shall be on the bridge."

McCoy watched him leave, feeling a stab of sympathy. Ordering Spock out was one of the hardest things he had ever done, but the fewer people he had to fall over, the better. And Spock would not be witness to Kirk's agony - an agony that would tear him apart, as it was threatening to tear McCoy apart. There had been no reason to suspect that Kirk would be allergic to tetrathile, but McCoy felt responsible anyway. He was Chief Medical Officer, and he had ordered the drug administered; if Kirk died, it would be his fault. Sighing, McCoy moved toward the isolation unit. He knew the next several hours would show whether Kirk would live or die.



During those hours, Spock moved like a zombie. With Kirk incapacitated, perhaps dying, Spock was still in command of the *Enterprise*. He refused to let anyone take over his duty time. But his presence on the bridge, his icy control, no longer inspired exhausted crewmembers to give more than they had left. Now they were scared, tip-toeing quietly so as not to provoke a biting statement concerning their inefficiency.

When his duty shift ended, Spock gratefully escaped to the solitude of his own quarters. Here he could give in to his pain. Here no one else could see his unsuccessful struggle with his emotions. Several times he had gone to Sickbay to see Kirk, but McCoy had always been there to block his way. Each time the report was the same: gravely ill, no change. It was too early to know whether Kirk would recover.

Spock was on the bridge again when a message came from Starfleet. Their next scheduled stop had been aborted, and they were to take an unscheduled R & R. Spock immediately informed the crew - he knew Kirk would have done so and would have relished the response - but he did not join in the general celebration.

"McCoy to bridge. Mr. Spock, would you report to the sickbay when you have a free minute?"

As McCoy expected, Spock arrived at Sickbay in less than a minute. "It's all right, Spock," the doctor said, his elation almost wiping the marks of exhaustion from his face. "There's no permanent damage. He's going to make it."

"May I see him?"

McCoy nodded. "But only for a minute. He's not very strong. He's been through an awful lot."

Kirk lay quiet, medication still being pressured into his arm. His eyes were closed, ringed by dark circles of suffering and exhaustion. The marks of his recent injuries stood out in sharp relief on his pale body. McCoy had not had time to repair the scars. Kirk appeared to be terribly thin. Spock would not have believed one could lose so much weight over a small number of days.

As he stood there, Kirk opened his eyes. A tiny smile touched his face as he saw Spock standing there. "Hello." The word was a dry croak, but it felt like a bear hug to the emotionally drained Vulcan.

"McCoy says you are going to make a complete recovery, Jim."

"Um."

Spock moved forward until he was standing beside the bed, then put his hand on Kirk's shoulder, needing to touch him, to be certain he really was here, that it wasn't an illusion caused by so many stress-filled hours. "We are on course for Ridan, Captain. We have been ordered to take an unscheduled R & R..."

"That's enough, Spock," said McCoy, who had walked up behind him. "The captain needs some sleep."

Reluctantly, Spock withdrew his hand. "I shall be back, Jim."

Kirk nodded slightly. Their eyes met for a moment, then Spock turned and left. McCoy busied himself with the scanner, making sure that Kirk was continuing on his agonizingly slow road to recovery.

"I'm glad I let him see you, Jim. He was going to come apart at the seams if I didn't."

Again Kirk smiled slightly, though he didn't have the strength to answer. McCoy pulled the thermal sheet up higher and then stood back.

"I recommend you get some sleep, Captain. I intend to do the same. In fact, I may sleep for a week!" Then he chuckled. "Well, half an hour, anyway, then I'll be back to check on you." He headed for the door but was stopped by a quiet, strained voice.

"Bones...thanks."

He turned back to Kirk for a moment, the emotion on his face an open testimony to the strain of the past few days. "Welcome back, Jim."



It was ten days before McCoy decided to let Kirk out of Sickbay. He had made a steady recovery, and his growing restlessness told McCoy he was returning to normal.

"Hey, Jim, how about a fishing trip?" Kirk looked at McCoy with amusement as he pushed away his breakfast tray.

"Anything sounds good after being stuck in here," said Kirk with a grin. He looked at McCoy more closely. "Bones, you're not kidding, are you?"

"Heck no! How often do we get an unscheduled R & R? You need to lie in the sun and sleep, I need to lie in the sun and sleep, and Spock needs to..."

"I assure you, Doctor, that type of occupation is the farthest thing from my mind."

McCoy ignored the fact that Spock had quietly entered the sickbay. "...needs to get off this ship and forget about responsibility and being logical for a while."

Kirk grinned at the insulted look on Spock's face. "All right, Bones. As my doctor, you can order me on vacation," his smile widened, "and as Spock's commanding officer, I can order him to take rest leave." He turned back to McCoy. "You, Doctor, I am sure, need no prompting?"

"None whatsoever, sir," McCoy answered with a grin.



"They've got to be kidding!"

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly at Kirk's outburst, but he made no comment. He was reasonably sure that the orders the Enterprise had just received were no joke.

"A starship - this starship - just to ferry Admiral Komack to Starbase Ten?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Someday, Spock...someday I am going to take the offer of flag rank just so I can get back at this...at this..." He stopped, at a loss for words to describe Komack.

"Jim, this order necessitates a simple run from Starbase Nine to Starbase Ten. Those orders do not require the presence of the commanding officer. I am sure this need not interrupt your planned vacation."

A momentary look of surprise crossed Kirk's face. "I guess it doesn't, does it?" He thought about the matter for a few seconds, then looked pointedly at Spock. "Nor does it require the presence of a First Officer or a Chief Medical Officer."

"Jim, I don't think Admiral Komack would appreciate it if all three of us were absent."

Kirk grinned. "No, he wouldn't, would he?" He reached across his desk and pressed the intercom. "Mr. Scott, please report to my quarters immediately."



"Hey, sleepyhead, if you're going to spend all day snoring, get that skinny, scarred carcass outside where it can get some sun."

Kirk groaned and pulled the pillow over his head. McCoy studied the situation a minute, then took hold of the bottom sheet on Kirk's bed and unceremoniously dumped him onto the floor.

"Hey, whataya think you're doing?"

"Getting my commanding officer out of bed. Go on, brush your teeth, don't bother shaving, and I'll have a hot meal ready for you out on the dock."

"I'd rather have coffee."

"Sorry."

Kirk threw his pillow at McCoy's retreating figure, then grabbed his bathing suit and headed for the washroom. Ten minutes later he appeared on the dock, where McCoy was sitting and eating a sandwich.

"That's a strange looking breakfast, Bones."

"It's lunch," said McCoy shortly, pushing a large plate of food over to Kirk.

Kirk ate a couple of mouthfuls and made a face. "When you say you're going to heat something up, you don't kid around." He put the fork down. "Think I'll go for a swim."

"Don't get too far out."

"Yes, Mommy," Kirk said with a grin.

While Kirk was swimming, Spock appeared carrying a tricorder. "Don't you ever get tired of working, Spock?" McCoy asked, his eyebrows on the rise.

"I was not 'working', Doctor. I was merely cataloging..."

"Spare me the details, please." McCoy noticed Spock looking at the food that Kirk had left almost untouched. The dark eyes held an unspoken question.

"I don't know, Spock. He hasn't complained, but there's definitely something wrong. He's been getting headaches..."

"That in itself is not unusual."

"No, but what he normally gets are stress headaches. They come with the job. He's under no stress here. And he hasn't eaten enough in the last couple of days to keep body and soul together. He blames it on my cooking..."

McCoy gestured to the untouched meal. He hesitated for a moment, then continued. "Before I dumped him out of bed this morning, I monitored his temperature. It was 38 degrees centigrade. I don't like it."

They were interrupted as Kirk arrived, dripping wet from his swim. He grabbed a towel and scrubbed himself dry, but McCoy's experienced eyes saw the intermittent shivers run through his body.

"Jim...?" Kirk's eyes met his, slightly too bright. "I'd like you to be honest."

Kirk first tried to look puzzled, then gave up. "I think I've got the flu or something, Bones. It's been going on the last couple of days. Nothing serious - I just feel rotten."

"Okay, back to bed."

"You won't dump me out again?"

"Promise."

Kirk slept the rest of the day, deeply and naturally. He looked as if he felt much better when he woke up late in the evening, and he drank a mug of soup with no protest. By the time McCoy washed the dishes and came back to check on his patient, Kirk was asleep again. And his temperature was normal.



"Good morning, gentlemen." Both Spock and McCoy jumped a little at Kirk's voice. They had been deliberately quiet so as not to disturb his sleep.

"How are you feeling, Jim?"

"Like a million credits, Bones. Guess that sleep was all I needed." He met McCoy's skeptical gaze. "Honest, I feel fine. Can I eat?"

"I guess so. Sit down, I'll make you something."

When McCoy returned, Kirk and Spock were deep in discussion about something. He put down the waffles he had made with no comment. Kirk's eyes widened in delight when he saw what McCoy had prepared for breakfast.

"Honest to gosh waffles! Bones, I haven't eaten any for years!"

A fully satisfied Kirk finally pushed his mug and dish away with a contented sigh. He turned to McCoy. "Spock is planning a trip up into the hills. Can I go?"

McCoy smiled at Kirk's enthusiasm, something that had been missing the past couple of days. "I'm surprised you're asking my permission," he grumbled, "but I don't see why not, as long as I'm invited, too."

Spock visibly hesitated before he answered. "It is merely to catalog geological data, Doctor," the Vulcan started to protest.

"Fine. You do the cataloging, Jim and I will stroll along behind you."

The day passed pleasantly. After a bit of initial needling, McCoy left Spock in peace to pursue his data collecting, while he and Kirk simply enjoyed their surroundings. They got back late, and Spock treated them to a thick vegetable stew, which even McCoy admitted he enjoyed. The three talked late into the night, sharing the easy rapport of old friends.

But Kirk woke up the next morning with a pounding headache. When he first sat up, he felt sick all over, but the feeling passed. As he was taking a shower, McCoy came banging in.

"The *Enterprise* requests our illustrious presence, Captain."

Kirk turned the shower off and grabbed for a towel. "The *Enterprise*? What's going on?"

"Don't ask me, I'm only a doctor. Spock's already beamed up. I've packed and am here to help you. Scotty wouldn't say much, but apparently your presence is required rather urgently." His expression softened as he saw Kirk's gaze travel to the lake, then to the hills they had explored the day before. "Hey, we'll come back. There's plenty of time for that."

Kirk grinned ruefully. "Tell me about it, Bones. How often do we get to do something like this?"

McCoy sobered. "Yeah, you're right. Well, get dressed, and I'll pack your things."

Within minutes, they were back aboard the *Enterprise*. Spock met them in the transporter room. "Priority message from Starfleet, Captain."

Kirk groaned inwardly. His headache hadn't subsided, and his stomach was starting to churn alarmingly. Obviously, he hadn't yet kicked the flu bug.

Starfleet's orders were brief. A Baldesian ship, a modified transport/cargo vessel carrying a valuable load of dilithium to Fleet Storage Headquarters, had been having difficulties with both her crew and her engines. Her Human commander had radioed for aid. He was unable to get the humanoid crew working together as a unit, and the fighting that had been sporadic was now threatening the transport of the dilithium. The ship's engine problems were also more than the crew of the *Dastan* appeared capable of handling. The *Enterprise* was ordered to intercept the cargo ship, and Kirk was authorized to do whatever he considered necessary to get the ship to its destination. The dilithium was critically needed at the huge Starfleet storage base. The bulk of the dilithium for Starfleet's ships

was kept there, and supplies were dangerously low.

"How long before our rendezvous, Spock?"

"Eleven hours, sir."

Kirk nodded wearily. "You have the con then. I'm going to the sickbay for a few minutes."

Worry shone out of the dark eyes that followed Kirk's slow progress down the corridor. The captain seemed to be depressed, as well as sick. Spock couldn't remember Kirk ever behaving in such a manner. His struggle with death had been fought and won almost a month ago. Could it have depleted him this much?



"Bones, are you busy?"

McCoy looked up at the sound of Kirk's voice. "No, come in." He watched as Kirk gingerly made his way to a chair. "You don't look like you're ready to run a four-minute mile." His gentle teasing didn't raise a smile.

"I feel like hell," Kirk said bluntly. "My head hurts, and I feel sick all over. There's got to be a reason. I don't get sick, Bones. Why can't I shake this silly flu or whatever it is?"

McCoy studied him carefully. He couldn't ever remember Kirk coming to him complaining about feeling ill. Kirk was one of the healthiest people he knew. He had a knack for getting himself beaten to a pulp, but - aside from an occasional cold - McCoy couldn't remember him ever being sick. And now Kirk had come to him of his own volition. The fact that no one had dragged him kicking and screaming into Sickbay bothered McCoy more than anything.

"Okay, Jim, strip off your shirt and let's take a look at you."

McCoy went over Kirk with a fine tooth comb and found that he had the same symptoms that he had displayed several days earlier when they had been on their soon-to-be-interrupted vacation. But between those couple of days on the planet and now, Kirk had felt fine, had been back to his normal energetic self, and that didn't follow any flu pattern McCoy had ever heard of.

He finally put the computer readouts down on his desk and went back to the diagnostic bed where he had left Kirk. He shook his head at Kirk's questioning expression. "Nothing, Jim. You must still be down from that mess a few weeks ago. Your tests don't show anything concrete."

Kirk slowly pushed himself upright, a slight frown on his face, but he didn't question McCoy's findings. "As long as it's nothing serious, I guess I can put up with it for a while longer." He slid off the bed, then pulled his shirt back on. "Thanks, Bones," he added, a slight smile touching his face.

"I would like you to take it easy, though..."

"Sure. See you later."

"Sure," McCoy said to himself. "I might as well talk to a blank wall." He shrugged his shoulders and went back into his office.



Kirk listened to the plaintive wailing of the *Dastan*'s captain for almost five minutes before he blew his stack. He could be patient if he found a man in trouble, a man who was trying and needed help. But Stan Wilson was not such a man - he was an incompetent who tried to excuse himself by claiming he had a rebellious crew. Only a few times had Spock seen Kirk really lose his temper, and the Vulcan was once again impressed. Kirk left Wilson white-faced and silent.

Spock followed him to the small engine room of the freighter. Scott was there with a couple of his people, plus the engine crew of the *Dastan*. The latter were lounging against the wall, making no effort to help the techs from the *Enterprise*. Kirk noted that Scott was ignoring them, so he did the same. He listened silently as the Chief Engineer described the problems he had found.

"It's going to be difficult to get her going, sir," Scott said with a touch of pain in his voice. "These wee bonnies have been neglected, and they're suffering for it."

Kirk hid a smile at Scott's aggrieved tone. The engineer probably wouldn't have been half as upset if they had found the crew in the condition the engines were in. "Can you fix them?"

"I dinna know, sir. At least, I couldn't say when she could steam under her own power."

Kirk frowned. They were uncomfortably close to Klingon territory. The cargo would be an awful temptation if the Klingons discovered what the ship was carrying. "Get to work, Scotty. We've got to get out of here as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir. Uh..." He eyed the sullen group of humanoids standing across the engine room. "Do I press them into service, or continue to ignore them?"

Kirk grinned. "I'll leave that up to you. Just don't provoke a mutiny." They both smiled, then Kirk turned and left, Spock close on his heels.

Outside the room, Kirk paused, leaning against the wall, his hand pressed to his throbbing head. The pain came

and went; at the moment it was pounding harder than ever and was starting to get him down. Finally he let his hand drop and looked at Spock. "I think we'd better put a tractor beam on this ship, Spock, and get her to more neutral territory so Scotty can have time to work his miracles. I'll stay on board here to keep my eye on things. I want you to take Stan Wilson back to the *Enterprise*. If we can get him off this ship, maybe we can get the crew reorganized."

"Captain, may I suggest that perhaps it would be wiser if I remained aboard...?"

Amusement lit Kirk's face. Spock's carefully worded question only served to underline the feelings behind it. "No, Mr. Spock, you may not." His face sobered. "It's not that I don't appreciate what you're trying to do, but..." He hesitated, not knowing how to tell the Vulcan that cold logic was the last thing this crew needed to hear. But before he could continue, they were interrupted by a loudly swearing Wilson, towing two security men in his wake.

"Kirk, by all the universe, what do you mean by this nonsense of taking over my ship? If you think I'm just gonna stand by and let you do it..."

Kirk's eyes met Spock's. "You have your orders, Commander."

For an instant, Spock hesitated. Then he motioned to the security detail, who practically picked Wilson up and carried him after the swiftly retreating figure of the Vulcan.



"He's where? You let him do what?" McCoy's astonishment was only slightly greater than his anger.

"He is aboard the *Dastan*, Doctor, and I did not 'let' him do anything. I returned to the *Enterprise* on his orders." The cold expression on Spock's face told McCoy that the Vulcan disapproved of Kirk's order as much as the Human did.

But they had no time for brooding over it. Preparations were underway to lock a tractor beam on the freighter. Chekov was calculating course and speed necessary to get them away from the Klingon sphere of influence.

"It's a heavy freighter, Mr. Spock," said Sulu. "Warp one is about all the engines will be able to handle pulling that much weight for any length of time. We might be able to go a little faster over a short distance, but we'd be pushing our luck...and the engines' reserves."

"Agreed, Mr. Sulu. Keep monitoring engine stress and let me know if there seems to be any possibility of trouble."

"Aye, sir."



Kirk was sitting in Wilson's cramped quarters when Spock contacted him. He had just had an awkward session with the *Dastan*'s first officer. He had used every means of persuasion he could think of to get the man interested in being rescued, and had met a wall of apathy. Vargas had listened in total silence to Kirk's ideas on what had to be done to get the ship going again, both the engines and the crew. When Kirk, in final desperation, had asked him for his opinion, he had gotten a one word answer.

"None, sir."

Kirk had stood silent, anger and astonishment fighting for first place. For a long moment, he had looked at the impassive violet eyes of the humanoid, then he had finally nodded slightly and excused the man.

He had been sitting on the tiny, rock-hard bed since then, wishing the terrible pounding in his head would stop, and trying to think of some way to get through to these implacable humanoids. His communicator broke into his thoughts.

"Kirk here."

"Spock, Captain. We are ready to apply the tractor beam. Mr. Chekov has plotted the course necessary to get us away from this sector. Even then, it will take 47.135 hours."

"That's a long time at a slow speed, Spock."

"Agreed, sir, but it is the best course available."

"All right. Give me fifteen minutes, then have Chekov contact the *Dastan*'s navigator. I want those course coordinates known here as well, just in case."

Spock felt a prickling sensation run the length of his spine and briefly wondered about it. He did not believe in premonition. "Affirmative, Captain." He hesitated for a moment, and Kirk broke in before he had a chance to go on.

"What's the matter, Mr. Spock?"

Spock frowned. He could never keep anything from Kirk. "Jim, McCoy wants to see you for a minute - aboard the *Enterprise*."

"Not now," Kirk said crisply. "Maybe later, when things settle down a bit over here." Spock's silence told Kirk there was going to be an argument. "I'm all right, Spock. I've got a headache, but I'm not going to conk out."

"Conk out", sir?"

"Affirmative. Give that message to McCoy, will you?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good. I'll contact you again after we get underway. Kirk out." Kirk cut off communications before Spock had a chance to argue further. As he stood up, Kirk knew he had been less than truthful. He had a headache, but he also felt sick and dizzy. And unlike the previous recent attacks, this one hadn't passed quickly. He reached for the intercom. "Captain to crew. I want everyone in the mess area in five minutes, and I mean everyone. No excuses. Kirk out."

He was going to have to use iron authority. His talk with the first officer had shown him that there was no use appealing to pride, loyalty, or duty. These were not Starfleet officers; they were merchant sailors who had suffered from bad leadership and were serving aboard an abused vessel. These people would see a side of James T. Kirk that not many ever had the need to see. It wasn't going to be pleasant for any of them.

They were all there when he walked in, even Scott and his two men. Kirk nodded slightly as he passed them. Scott saw the look on Kirk's face and braced himself.

Kirk surveyed the crew sitting in front of him. His eyes were cold and unblinking, and it was the humanoids who broke eye contact first. When Kirk finally spoke, his voice was low and utterly devoid of feeling, which made what he said all the more chilling.

"Gentlemen, as of this moment, the *Dastan* has been commandeered by Starfleet. All of you know what that means." He paused, letting the enormity of the statement sink in. "From now until we get to the supply depot on Baldam, I am in command, and you are under regulations set down by Starfleet. You are no longer independent - you are in Starfleet. You will be judged as if you were officers of the Fleet. All of you know what will happen if my orders are not obeyed."

Scott's eyes roved over the angry and sullen crew, then back to Kirk. His captain could have been carved out of stone. He stood absolutely still, his face pale, still thin after his last battle with illness. Yet Scott knew there wasn't a person in the room who would challenge his authority. Scott also knew that Kirk would far rather hold out a hand and meet someone halfway, but that if he was pushed, it was impossible to back him into a corner. And everyone in the room realized it. They had been warned. They would obey out of grudging fear, not loyalty - but they would obey.

Kirk let the silence draw out until he saw some of the crew start to shift uncomfortably in their seats. Then he spoke again. "The *Enterprise* will activate a tractor beam in twenty minutes, so I want all hands to stations immediately." Again the cold hazel eyes swept the room. "Dismissed."

They filed out silently, until only Scott was left. As Kirk met his sympathetic gaze, he smiled slightly. "I guess I was a little hard on them."

Scott smiled back. "Aye, sir, that you were. But I don't imagine the engine crew will be leaning against the walls any longer."

Kirk sighed quietly. "I don't like to threaten people, Scotty. Sometimes you have to lead them through hell, and resentment isn't good for morale. Angry men desert you..." His voice died away as he pressed his hand to his pounding head.

"It's only for a few days, sir..." Scott hesitated, not sure what to say and a little alarmed by Kirk's action. It was rare for Kirk to be ill, and even rarer for him to show it. But before Scott had a chance to speak, Kirk had dropped his hand and straightened up.

"You're right, Scotty. Well, we'd better get to our respective repair stations. You heal those engines, and I'll see what I can do with the crew."

"Aye, sir."



The *Enterprise* got the tractor beam locked on with no problem and started out under impulse power. She would gradually increase thrust until finally reaching warp one. Uhura kept a channel open to Engineering so that any sign of trouble would be reported immediately. Spock settled into the command chair and waited for Kirk to contact him.

At that moment, Kirk was just getting ready to leave the engineering section of the *Dastan*. Scott was making some headway with the engines, and work was progressing faster now that he had a full compliment of workers. They were not working willingly, but they were working.

"I've got about one quarter impulse power, Captain," said Scott, wiping a smear of dirt from his face, then looking sorrowfully at the towel in his hands. "Heaven only knows when these poor darlings were last cleaned - if ever."

Kirk smiled sympathetically. The engine room on board the *Enterprise* was always so clean you could eat off the floor. "Well, as long as we have some sort of power, I feel a lot better. Keep me informed. I'll be in Wilson's quarters making a report."

Scott's worried eyes followed Kirk as he left. Kirk's face was flushed, and an occasional shiver had run through his body as he had stood talking. But the engineer knew better than to suggest that Kirk should take it easy.

As the door slid shut behind him, Kirk let his shoulders sag. There was no one to see him here, and he could let himself go. Slowly he made his way across the small room and sat down. The bed was no softer now than it had been earlier, but he was too sick to care. He knew he should contact Spock, but he could do it just as easily in a few minutes. He felt an overwhelming need to lie down and close his eyes first. He pulled up the thick blanket that covered the end of the bunk and was asleep in seconds.

He slept the sleep of the dead. The hours passed slowly, and still he did not wake. Scott peeked in on him once, having received a worried call from Spock, because Kirk had failed to contact him. But he made no effort to wake Kirk, merely checked to make sure the captain's sleep was normal, and reported back to the *Enterprise*. McCoy recommended that he be allowed to sleep, so Scott went back to the engine room and the mountain of work that waited for him. He was still there hours later when Kirk arrived looking fresh and rested, not at all like the sick man who had faced him earlier.

"How's it coming, Scotty?"

Scott first looked surprised, then pleased at Kirk's appearance. "Impulse engines are up to full capacity, sir, and we're beginning on the warp engines now, though I doubt we can do much with them. Oh, Mr. Spock called earlier..."

"I know, I've had my reprimand already. Have you had anything to eat recently?"

"No, sir. I guess I got too involved here."

"Come on, I'm starving."

They were eating when Spock's call came through. "We've just received a priority order from Starbase Six, Captain. Apparently there are some ships in trouble in Sector 274. They misjudged an asteroid belt. All are heavily damaged and may have to be abandoned. We are ordered to render them aid..."

"What type of ships, Spock?"

"Small interplanetary ones, sir. They lack the heavy shielding of long-range cruisers. There are a total of 47 travelers." He hesitated for a minute, then continued. "We'll need to achieve maximum warp, Captain. We'll have to cut the tractor beam and leave you here."

Kirk smiled a little at Spock's tone, knowing what the Vulcan would really like to say. "We'll be all right, Spock. We'll just putt along on impulse power until you get back." He glanced over at Scott. "And you can stop worrying about me, Commander. I've just packed away a meal that would have left McCoy green if he had seen me eat it. I think that sleep I just had did the trick."

Spock sounded unconvinced, but he had his orders and would obey them. Kirk smiled to himself as he put away his communicator, then stood and picked up his tray. "We'd better get back to work, Scotty. You keep the engines going, and I'll worry about the crew."

During the next few hours, Kirk showed why he was one of the most respected commanders in Starfleet. The crew of the *Dastan* was working with smooth efficiency, and the freighter was slowly continuing along the course that would eventually take them to Baldam. Kirk continued to rule the crew as he had in his first talk with them. They saw no hint of the officer who commanded the *Enterprise*. There was no humor, no small talk, no camaraderie. Kirk was the stern taskmaster who demanded that the crew give exactly what was expected, and they found themselves - however unwillingly - responding to that authority.



The two Klingon cruisers were patrolling the outer edges of their territory just as they had for the past 27 seasons. They had not run into any trouble, nor did they expect to do so. Occasionally a Federation ship would appear on their long-range sensors, but it always kept to its own territory and soon disappeared into its own space. The Klingons rarely challenged Federation ships, knowing the *Enterprise* was the Starfleet cruiser assigned to this sector. No Klingon wanted to provoke a conflict with her captain, James Kirk. It was possible that the stories of his ability and his conquests were overplayed, but it was the rare Klingon commander who was ready to find out first hand.

"Commander, sensors show a Federation freighter..." The man hesitated for a minute, rechecking the readings. "It is moving at impulse speed..." He kept his eyes glued to his monitor. "They are moving steadily at impulse speed, bearing 117 mark 6..." He fiddled with his instruments for a moment. "The Starfleet Storage Headquarters on Baldam is on that heading."

By this time the commander of the lead Klingon vessel, Kendat, was standing by his science officer's side. "Baldam? It would take a freighter years to get there at impulse speed. Scan her, Keel."

The other Klingon moved some dials and examined the readings. "It is a Baldesian freighter...manned. I count 21 life-readings...4 of them Human."

The commander's eyebrows rose. "Humans on a Baldesian freighter? That is unusual. Can you tell what cargo they are carrying, if any?"

Again the dials turned. The silence drew out. Finally Keel looked up in disbelief. "Dilithium."

For a moment no one on the bridge of the Klingon cruiser moved. A large freighter full of dilithium - the implications boggled the mind! Finally Kendat returned to his command chair and contacted the other Klingon ship. They both came to a halt and began a slow and compete scan of the entire area. The freighter continued on its course, never once showing any sign of switching to warp speed.

"Nothing, Commander. The long-range scanners show it to be the only ship in the area."

Kendat drummed his fingers on the console. It would be a grave risk to enter Federation territory, but a freighter full of dilithium was too much of a temptation. He stood staring at the star pattern on the viewscreen, a plan slowly forming in his mind. "Keel, if something has damaged their warp drive, could they break free from a tractor beam?"

The science officer thought about it for a moment. "I doubt it. Freighters are made for durability, not power."

Kendat nodded slowly. "Then keep your sensors and scanners clear. Keep monitoring the area and let me know the instant any ship other than that freighter appears. I am beaming over to the *Quatral* for a short time."



"Two Klingon cruisers approaching at warp six, Captain. They're on an intercept course and are signalling us." Vargas's voice sounded almost bored as he relayed his information.

Kirk was out of his chair in an instant. "Klingons? When did you first pick up their readings?"

"Half hour ago. Didn't think much of it. They often shadow us as we cross that open stretch bordering their territory."

Kirk's mind was working furiously as he contacted Engineering. Even though he knew evasive action was useless, habit made him turn to a man he had turned to so often before.

"Hell, where did they come from?" was Scott's first reaction. "There's nothing we can do from here, sir. We're pounding along at full speed as it is. Do you want me to come up?"

"Negative, Scotty, but keep your wits about you. Maybe we can bluff our way out of this one."

"We've done it before, sir," Scott replied calmly. Kirk agreed, but silently recalled that he had had the *Enterprise* at full strength backing him then. Suddenly he remembered Elaan. Maybe...

Unarmed, there was no way the *Dastan* could fight. Kirk gave the order to proceed and ignore the incoming signal from the Klingons. For the first time, the bridge crew visibly hesitated, and Kirk had to use the full weight of his authority. If anything, the looks he received were more sullen than before. Twice more the attempted communications went unanswered, then the freighter shuddered to a stop.

"Tractor beam, Captain," Vargas reported.

All eyes turned to Kirk, silently accusing, silently questioning. Giving himself a moment to think, Kirk contacted engineering and had Scott switch off the engines before his repair efforts were undone. But he couldn't keep postponing the inevitable.

"Open a channel to the Klingons, Ja," he said to the communications technician.

The star pattern on the viewscreen blurred, then disappeared to be replaced by the inquiring face of Kendat. Kirk didn't give him a chance to say a word.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Explain why you are deliberately interfering with a vessel on Starfleet business!"

"Captain...?" Kendat's face and voice showed his surprise and confusion.

"You heard me, Commander. Release this ship immediately! You are trespassing on Federation territory. You know the consequences of such an action."

Surprised though he had been, Kendat recovered quickly. "Captain Kirk, this is indeed an honor. We had not expected to meet you here, although we did know the *Enterprise* was in this quadrant. However, not in this sector, it appears..."

"Don't count on it."

Kendat hesitated. Something in the assured manner of the Human made him wonder if he had missed something obvious. Suddenly he was nervous. "In that case, Captain," he said, disguising his uneasiness, "we shall take you

and your ship to more peaceful space. I know we shall have no argument. Once there, we shall decide what to do with you."

"You are risking a great deal, Commander."

"Perhaps, Captain, but then, perhaps not. Until later..." The viewscreen blurred again, then the familiar star pattern firmed into place. A slight vibration ran through the ship. Vargas glanced at the computer readings, then turned to Kirk, his anger and hate undisguised.

"We're moving, Captain." Taja, the navigator, confirmed that they were heading straight for Klingon space.

"How long before we reach the border?" asked Kirk, fully aware that Vargas's hate was shared by everyone on the bridge.

"Thirty-seven minutes," Vargas replied.

Kirk headed for the turbolift. "Vargas, you have the con. I'll be in Engineering."



"I say we give the Klingons what they want," Vargas urged in a heated voice. The crew was gathered; the word had gone out as soon as Kirk left for engineering. "Why give our lives? We're not fighters. What do we care who gets this dilithium?"

Taja shook his head. "You heard what he told us. He commandeered this ship. We'll have Starfleet on our necks..."

"Not if they don't know what happened. Look, the Klingons want Kirk as much as they want this cargo. We'll give them both. With Kirk out of the way, how will Starfleet know what happened?"

"What about that engineer?" said Ja. "Kirk's always running to him."

"We get him out of the way, too." Vargas turned to Sta, the engineering assistant, a huge, burly man. "I'll leave that up to you. Put that Scott fellow and his two men out of commission. I don't care how you do it. I'll take care of Kirk. Now, get back to your stations before they suspect anything."



Kirk was leaving Engineering as Sta and his men entered. He nodded at them absently, his mind obviously else-where. Sta smiled to himself. Preoccupied as he was, Kirk would be unprepared for the welcome awaiting him on the bridge. Then he heard Scott call him and moved quietly forward to complete his own orders.

As the turbolift doors opened, Kirk was surprised to see the image of Kendat on the viewscreen. He stepped forward, his mouth opening to ask what was going on. Almost at the same instant, he saw the phaser in Vargas's hand.

"What the...?" His voice broke off as he was hit with heavy stun and slammed back against the closed doors of the turbolift. He felt himself crumpling to the floor, his body momentarily numb from the shock it had received. He saw Vargas turn to the viewscreen.

"The ship's cargo and Captain Kirk are now yours, Commander. We have your word that the ship will be left to us?"

Kendat nodded. "The exchange is more than fair. My men will board shortly to supervise the transfer of the cargo, and I shall come for Captain Kirk myself..."

Kirk felt blackness start to overwhelm him. His mind cried out for Spock as the shock of the phaser stun finally took full effect. Then he knew nothing.



Kirk was lying face down on the floor, his hands tightly tied behind him, his ankles similarly bound. His body ached from the phaser stun. He wondered how long he had been unconscious and where he was. Slowly he rolled over onto his side, then pushed himself up onto one elbow and looked around. The shinner of the force field showed him that wherever he was, he was trapped. He crawled over to a wall and gratefully leaned back against it. He sat quietly and took stock of his position. Whichever way he looked at it, he was in a hell of a mess. His only hope was that the Klingons hadn't destroyed the *Dastan* and that somehow Scotty had survived. But he wasn't hopeful on either count. He had no idea how long it would be before the *Enterprise* returned from her mission and found the *Dastan*...or her remains. Even then, Spock would havea no idea what had happened.

A slight buzzing sound caught his attention, and he looked up to see Kendat and two guards standing in the doorway. Kirk and the Klingon just stared at each other for a minute or so, then the Klingon smiled.

"I see that Vargas did you no permanent damage." Kirk's eyes darkened, but he didn't answer. Kendat waited a while, then realized that Kirk was going to remain silent. "I have heard much of you, Kirk. You have quite a reputation among our Fleet..." Still there was no response from the Human. "You are a tactical commander. There is much we can learn from you about your Starfleet."

"It's been tried before, Commander...unsuccessfully." The voice was low and calm, and there was certainly no

fear in the steady gaze. Kendat found himself admiring the Human's control. He was not sure he would behave as well were their positions reversed.

"But before, you were not at Staldat. I think we shall learn the information we seek." He watched impassively as Kirk pushed himself a little straighter against the wall. "Forgive these barbaric restraints, Captain," he went on in a pleasant voice, "but I have heard of your 'exploits', shall we say. I want to know for certain just where you are, and in what condition. Another hour will bring us to Staldat, where you will be given more comfortable surroundings. Until then..." He gave a slight bow and left with his escort. The shimmer fell into place as the force field was reactivated.

Kirk slumped weakly. The headache and nausea were back, and he knew the effect of the phaser stun couldn't completely account for the way he felt. He wondered again what was wrong with him. He was going to have to have his wits about him, and being sick wasn't going to help. He felt an uncharacteristic depression welling up. He couldn't hold out, couldn't...



Four hours later found Kirk standing shackled, dressed in a loose-fitting gray garment. He had just undergone a bruising body search that had left him weak and trembling. His head was pounding harder than ever, and he suspected that if he had eaten anything recently, he would have lost it. The iron digging into his ankles and wrists made any movement uncomfortable. But at the moment he was standing still, held in the grip of two Klingon jailers, confronted by Koth, chief interrogator of Staldat, the most feared of Klingon political prisons.

"So, Captain James T. Kirk," said Koth. "Many times I have wished to meet you face to face. I have heard much of you, and always spoken with respect. Kor and Kang, two of our most illustrious military commanders, have found you a worthy opponent. I hope I, too, shall see that side of you. Unfortunately, my occupation is not like theirs, or yours, to lead and to conquer. Mine is to seek out, to discover what is in a man's mind...what is in your mind, Captain."

Stony silence met him and, like Kendat, Koth was impressed by Kirk's outward lack of fear. He smiled to himself. He would not use the mindsifter on this one, not yet. First he would see if this man could be broken. If all else failed, the mindsifter was always there.



Kirk had lost count of the hours he had been in the chair. The questions beat at him and at him. He had given his name, nothing more. He ignored the threats of what was to come. He deliberately did not listen to Koth or to the man who occasionally relieved the Klingon interrogator. He was finding it difficult to stay awake, but if he drifted, icy cold water would hit him in the face. Now he was soaking wet, but still the Klingons had gained nothing.

Finally, he was taken to a small, dark cell, where his shackles were taken off and he was left alone. Exhausted, he curled up in a tight ball to ward off the cold, then fell asleep.

It was still dark when he woke. A slit of light under the door showed that food and water had been shoved in while he slept. He got up stiffly and went over to get it. Sniffing at the food, he decided he could forego it for a while and instead sipped the water experimentally. It tasted bitter but seemed all right, so he had a drink. He sat down again on the dank straw piled in the corner and obviously meant for a bed. He wondered at the primitive cell and other trappings. He knew many interrogation methods that would lead to success more quickly than this one. He could only surmise that Koth wanted to toy with him as a cat would with a mouse. Well, it wouldn't work. Spock had hit on that truth with the Romulan commander. James Kirk was not easy to break, or hadn't been up to this point. But now he wasn't sure just how much he could take, feeling as sick as he did.

Suddenly a terribly cold feeling ran through him, and he could feel himself start to shake like a leaf. He folded his arms tightly and rolled over onto his side, his knees drawn high and his teeth clamped together in a futile effort to keep them from chattering. He could feel a cold sweat start all over his body.

"Damn," he said fiercely under his breath, "they d-d-drugged that water! What a fool I w-w-was to d-d-drink it." He doubled up again with violent cramps, worse than those he'd experienced in Sickbay. He cried out as the pain swept through his body, writhing on the floor as the cramping got worse. Soon his clothes were soaked with sweat. His body trembled from cold chills as fever gripped him. The tremors gained in strength, until he was aware of nothing but his pain.



The Enterprise had made her destination in record time. They had arrived in time to rescue all endangered passengers, though the three ships involved were beyond salvaging. Within minutes all 47 people were safely aboard the Enterprise, and she was quickly making her way out of the asteroid belt. For several hours McCoy and his staff were kept busy checking the survivors, treating an injury here, a case of hysteria there.

McCoy shook his head wearily as he entered his office. He had served with trained Starfleet personnel for so long that he had forgotten how civilians could react to the unexpected. A couple of times he'd had to count to ten in order to deal with what had eventually amounted to nothing.

He had just poured himself a much-needed cup of coffee when Spock walked in. The Vulcan noted the coffee with a raised eyebrow. It was not what McCoy usually drank. McCoy smiled wearily. "Believe me, Spock, I would love to have a brandy right now, but I've got a sickbay full of potential malpractice suits that I don't want and can't afford." He took a large swallow of coffee while Spock's eyebrow rose even higher.

"I suspected you joined Starfleet for a reason, Doctor. Until now, I did not realize it was because you were assured a safe, captive audience."

"Very funny," McCoy said without amusement. "What brings you here, anyway?"

"A cargo ship is to rendezvous with us in approximately one hour. We are going to transfer these people along with Captain Wilson. The freighter will take them to Starbase Six. I need to forward a report of their condition, and need to know whether there are any you deem unable to leave starship facilities."

A smile crossed McCoy's face while Spock talked. He hadn't dreamed he would get rid of these people so soon. "They're all fit to leave, Spock, and the sooner the better!"

"Agreed, Doctor. Mr. Chekov has already plotted our course back to the *Dastan*."

"Good. I wonder how poor Jim is holding out against that cheerful bunch."



"I think he is coming around, Koth." The young Klingon doctor stepped back from Kirk's bedside. The Human had been stripped of his meager clothing and now lay covered by a thin blanket. He was no longer in the cell, but had been taken to a laboratory which doubled as a medvac when one was necessary.

Kirk's eyes slowly opened, and just as slowly he took stock of his new situation. Koth watched him carefully. None of them knew what had caused Kirk's violent illness. Somehow he had to get the Human to tell him.

"You are in our medvac, Kirk. Your seizure has passed." As before, nothing in the Human's face gave away any knowledge. "You had us concerned..."

Kirk nodded, a slightly amused look on his face. "Underestimated your dosage, I gather."

Koth looked at the doctor, neither understanding what Kirk was talking about. "Can you sit up?" the doctor asked.

Kirk hesitated, then pushed himself into a sitting position, surprised to find that he felt reasonably normal. He pulled the blanket around himself, then swung onto the floor, feeling better that he could face Koth man to man. "I trust you learned nothing," he said drily, hoping to find out what had happened.

Koth shook his head. "In the past hours, you had some mild convulsions and said some rather uncomplimentary things about us..." He paused for a moment, but Kirk did not seem surprised by what he had said. "Perhaps this is a normal function?" He had nothing to lose if he asked straight out.

"Perhaps," said Kirk. Maybe that was the normal reaction to whatever they had given him. How the hell was he supposed to know?

Koth found himself growing a little irritated. "You will remain here under restraints, Kirk. If you remain healthy, I shall resume the questioning."



Kirk felt like a laboratory specimen. The young doctor seemed unfamiliar with the Human species and was making up for lost time. He pricked and poked and prodded Kirk from every conceivable angle. The security restraints that held Kirk were far stronger than those used in the Enterprise sickbay, and - although he tried hard - he couldn't break free.

"Please," the doctor said, "do not struggle so. You will hurt yourself."

"As if you would care," Kirk responded bitterly. "Since you came so close to killing me, I doubt if a few bruises would bother your conscience."

"Killing you?" Excuse me, I do not speak your language well, but no one has tried to kill you."

"No?" Kirk studied the doctor, not believing his claim.

"I would like to know more about you. You were very sick, and I was not sure how to treat you. If I were more familiar with your physiology, perhaps you might not have suffered so much." He poured out some liquid and offered it to Kirk. "However, you are in great need of sleep. I think this will help you rest." Kirk tried to resist, but the doctor knew what he was doing, and soon the sweet-tasting liquid was gone. The doctor shook out another blanket and carefully placed a pillow under Kirk's head. "Sleep now," he instructed quietly, "you will need your strength."

Kirk was already feeling lightheaded, but he was alert enough to be surprised by the Klingon's actions. What was this doctor up to? But sleep overtook him before he had a chance to ponder the question.



Twenty-four hours passed, and Kirk's health remained normal. Finally Koth sent for him. The Klingon interrogator had to start getting some information, one way or another.

Kirk was strapped into a metal chair. Again he was clothed in the shapeless gray garment, but this time his feet were bare, shackled to metal floor-plates. Koth carried a rod in his hand, and Kirk's eyes followed it while the Klingon talked. He had a feeling he wouldn't like what was going to happen.

"All right, Kirk, what was wrong with you yesterday?"

Kirk smiled a little grimly. "Why don't you tell me?"

The rod was extended to Kirk's chest, and he felt a jolting prick of pain. "That's only a start, Kirk. It's going to get much worse unless you tell me."

"No."

He felt as if he had been punched in the stomach and briefly wondered why he was being so stubborn when he didn't even know the answer to the Klingon's question.



The *Enterprise* met the *Dastan* still limping along at impulse speed. She had made surprisingly little progress in the two days since the *Enterprise* had left her. Spock was even more surprised when it was Vargas who finally answered the *Enterprise*'s call. Spock could make little sense out of what he said and finally gave up, beaming over to the *Dastan* with some security men.

McCoy never found out what happened then. Ten minutes later, Spock ordered him to transport over to the *Dastan* with a medical team. Upon arriving, McCoy found two *Enterprise* engineering assistants dead, and Scott on the verge of death. Spock was nowhere to be seen, and there was no sign of Kirk.

"We've got to get him to sickbay," said McCoy as he injected stimulants into Scott's arm to counter the shock of transporting him. "Where are Spock and the captain?"

"Mr. Spock took Vargas in there," one of the security men said. "He left orders that they were not to be disturbed. We haven't seen any sign of the captain."

Cold fear gripped McCoy's heart as he waited to transport back to the *Enterprise*. Where was Jim? What on earth had happened here while they were gone?



He was still strapped in the chair when he woke. He felt as if he had been beaten to a pulp but knew he hadn't been touched. Whatever that rod was, it certainly left its mark.

The room was empty. Kirk twisted around, but no one was there, not even a guard by the door. The shackles had been unlocked and his legs were free. He wrenched his upper body violently against the straps and gradually worked his way free from the chair. But the door was locked, and even pitting his entire remaining strength against it did no good. He was probing the room, looking for some other means of escape, when cold chills again swept over him.

"God, no," he moaned quietly, falling to his knees. "Please, no..."

This attack was worse than the last. He fought it as long as he could, then gave in. Shadowy figures drifted in and out of his delirium; some seemed familiar, others he did not know. Once he thought Spock was there and that he had been rescued from this nightmare, but the vision faded away to be replaced by the images of strangers. He heard people talking and asking questions, but he didn't know the answers. Then something cool was being smoothed over his body. His head was lifted and he was given something to drink before everything went black.



The surgery had taken four hours, but Scott had made it. His head injuries had been extensive, and there had been a lot of pressure on his brain - pressure that might have caused permanent damage had it gone on much longer. As McCoy checked the engineer's vital signs again, he suddenly remembered another time and place...and an angry captain trying not to let his fondness for a man interfere with his ability to be that man's commanding officer. "What was it he called you then?" McCoy asked quietly. "A 'stiff-necked thistle-head'?" Guess that's what got you through this until help could arrive. Speaking of which, I think it's high time I found out what's going on, what's happened to Jim..." He left the duty nurse sitting with Scott and headed off to find Spock.

He located Spock in briefing room six, talking to someone over the intercom. He stopped just inside the door and listened, slowly realizing that Spock was talking to Starfleet Command.

"I am requesting that the nearest starship be assigned to take the *Dastan* in tow..."

"For what reason, Commander? McCoy recognized the strident voice of Admiral Komack.

"Admiral, the *Dastan* was commissioned by Starfleet Command to deliver a cargo of much-needed dilithium. The Klingons entered Federation space and took it by force. In my opinion, to allow that action to go unchallenged would be to invite future encroachments..."

McCoy's jaw went slack. Spock was seriously discussing the theft of dilithium and completely ignoring the fact that Kirk was missing!

"You have a point, Commander," Komack responded thoughtfully. "Do you feel there is a chance that you could retrieve that dilithium?"

"In my opinion, there is a high probability, sir. I would like permission to try."

Komack drummed his fingers on the table. "I can't give you any backup," he said. "Starfleet cannot officially sanction a deliberate flight so deep into Klingon space..."

"You need not do so, sir. We will do our best. If we are successful, the Klingons will have learned a lesson..."

"And if you fail?"

"We will not," Spock assured him.

By this time, McCoy was beet-red, his anger barely contained. Spock had glanced up at him once and then had completely ignored him.

"All right, Commander, I will direct the Lexington to interrupt her regular patrol and to rendezvous with you. Once she has taken command of the Dastan, the recovery mission is yours."

"Thank you, sir," Spock acknowledged quietly.

"Just make sure I can say the same to you," Komack returned grimly. "Starfleet out." Spock shut off the view-screen, then looked up at McCoy.

"Dilithium! Buttering up Komack! Damn you, Spock, does Jim Kirk mean so little to you?"

"I suggest that you get the injured members of the Dastan's crew ready for transport, Doctor. They are now officially prisoners of Starfleet Command. You have approximately one hour..."

"That doesn't answer my question, Spock. Why are you trying for that gold shirt that you keep swearing you don't want? You aren't even trying to find Jim! You're more concerned about some blasted rocks!"

"Doctor, Captain Kirk isn't Admiral Komack's favorite person, and although the Admiral does not seem to mind commandeering the Enterprise for himself, it is doubtful if he will allow us to do the same for the captain. I do not care what happens to the dilithium. I needed Starfleet's permission to go into Klingon space so that we can get the captain..."

"Get the captain? I don't understand..."

"The crew of the Dastan traded Captain Kirk and the dilithium to the Klingons in exchange for their lives. Now he's being held at Staldat..."

"The Klingons? They have him *where*?" McCoy looked at Spock in confusion. He had never heard of the place.

"I know where he is, Doctor. And I know how to get him out...if he is still alive."

McCoy flushed at Spock's words. He had been a fool to think that Kirk meant nothing to Spock. Once again he had jumped all over the Vulcan and been totally wrong. "Spock," he said lamely, "I shouldn't have..."

"You have one hour to be ready," said Spock. He nodded shortly and left.

Oh boy, thought McCoy as he headed for the sickbay, here we go again!



He was in the medvac again, the young doctor hovering over him, pressing a hypospray against his arm. Kirk jerked away, again surprised to find that he felt reasonably normal. The Klingon dropped the hypospray in surprise, caught off guard by Kirk's return to consciousness. Too late, Kirk discovered he was free of restraints: they were back in place, and he was flanked by guards before he had a chance to react.

"I will get Koth," said one.

"Why don't both of you get out of my medvac!" the doctor growled. "You've got him secured. I doubt if he can move the bed very far considering it's bolted to the floor." The guards looked at each other, then they both left.

Kirk didn't bother struggling. He tried to remember what had happened, but only fuzzy fragments stood out in his mind, and none of them made any sense.

"How are you feeling?" the doctor asked, eyeing him uncertainly.

"How long was I out?"

The young Klingon hesitated, not sure what Kirk had asked. "You were in the sickness for almost eight of your hours. After that, you slept for twenty more."

"Twenty-eight hours," said Kirk softly. "What are you trying to get from me?"

"Get? I do not understand."

"Look, we may be on different sides, but we both know the value of drugs. They can cure, they can kill, and they can make you talk."

"But we haven't..."

"Haven't you? You were there when I was sick. Why does Koth want me weakened like this? Does your truth drug need all resistance broken in order to be effective?"

"Kirk, we have given you drugs only to try to terminate the seizures you've been having. The sickness is your own..."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I..." Before the doctor had a chance to answer, Koth walked in, followed by the guards.

"He has recovered?"

The young doctor nodded. "He appears to be fully recovered."

Koth signaled the guards, who quickly undid the restraints and pulled Kirk roughly to his feet. This time they did not give him the skimpy clothing that he had been allowed earlier, but dragged him naked down the narrow corridor. He fought them, reasonably sure that it would do no good, but also knowing that he had pushed Koth about as far as he was going to be pushed. That could mean only one thing; and he knew from Spock's description of the Klingon mindshifter that he probably wouldn't be able to fight it, at least not for long.

It took four guards to get him inside the room and into the chair. Kirk used all the dirty gutter fighting he had ever learned; he left two of the guards lying on the floor. But there were just too many of them. Eventually, he was firmly strapped into the chair, a tight band was pulled across his forehead, and wires were stretched from it to the machine behind.

"I will toy with you no longer, Kirk. I intend to have the information I seek."

"Go to hell," Kirk retorted savagely.

He felt the probes start and deliberately blanked out everything but the incredible hate he felt for Koth. He bit his lip as the probes went deeper and the pain started. Blinding light flashed behind his closed eyes. He tried to move his head away, but it was strapped tight. The probes jolted deeper, then retreated. He relaxed for a moment, only to have the probes suddenly return, catching him off guard. He cried out sharply as intense pain stabbed into his head.

"Good," Koth said, scanning the readouts, "he's starting to weaken."

Kirk steeled himself. He wouldn't slip again. He could be as Vulcan as Spock any day. He stiffened as the probes came again, and listened with satisfaction to the disappointment of his captors as the scans were read aloud. He did not relax as the probes withdrew, but sat tensely waiting for the digging pain to return. His muscles began to tire from the tension of anticipation, and then he realized that Koth was talking to someone who had just entered the room. Then the probes were unfastened and the straps undone.

"Take him to his cell," Koth ordered, "then report back here."

Kirk was in no condition to resist. The Klingons had to support him as they made their way back to the area where Kirk had first been held. He had no idea why they had stopped the torture, but he was reasonably sure the Klingons hadn't learned much of what they'd wanted. They shoved him down onto the hard floor, then left him in the dark.

Kirk lay still for a while, waiting for his mind and body to recover a little from the alien machine. Finally he pushed himself to his feet and staggered over to the door. He pushed against it, knowing before he did that it was a useless attempt, but worth a try anyway. It was locked. Then he heard running footsteps and excited voices. He couldn't make out what was being said, but the word *Enterprise* caught his ear. He froze, sudden impossible hope welling up where before there had been none.

He carefully made his way back to the dirty straw and sat down, his mind whirling with questions. Could the *Enterprise* really be here? How could Spock possibly have known where to look?

Abruptly, the now-familiar chilling-cold gripped his body. He forced himself to his knees, then staggered to his feet. He had to be ready for whatever came. He held onto the wall for a few seconds, then slowly collapsed. He fought to stay conscious as violent tremors shook his body. He knew he was crying from pain and frustration - he could feel the tears mingling with his sweat - but he kept fighting. He had to stay conscious!

Then as he lay clutching the straw, a sudden clear thought went through him. This was all a trick! The *Enterprise* wasn't here - they had wanted him to hear that, to think that the ship was here. It was part of the "treatment". He curled into a tighter ball and gave in to his misery. The Klingon doctor had said this was his own sickness. If it was, he knew he couldn't fight it any longer, and he didn't know how long he could fight the Klingons. For the first time he felt truly vulnerable, the first seeds of doubt taking root in his mind. He was alone, helpless and sick. How could he hold out against the entire Klingon empire? The cell around him blurred into shapeless images. Again shadowy figures floated in and out of his vision. Minutes seemed like hours as he lay in agony. He was not aware of a familiar golden shimmer that enveloped his body and silently took him out of his private hell.

It was a bold, desperate plan that took the *Enterprise* and her crew deep into Klingon territory. The Klingons had entered Federation space and stolen valuable cargo - that was why Starfleet was taking action. But the *Enterprise* was going to rescue her captain.

Spock had no idea if it would be possible to retrieve the stolen dilithium, but it had to be possible to rescue Kirk. When Vargas had admitted that he had overheard Commander Kendat give an order to his navigator to set a course for Staldat, Spock had instantly come up with his desperate plan. He knew of Staldat - knew what was done there - and was reasonably sure that the Klingons would not kill Kirk right away. Kirk had information they desperately wanted; if Spock understood the Klingon mentality, they would draw out the satisfaction of having such a man in their possession.

The *Enterprise* entered Klingon territory at high warp speed. Staldat was not a Klingon command base, so Spock did not expect many ships capable of high-speed pursuit over long distances to be orbiting it. Even so, the *Enterprise* would have only one brief chance to retrieve Kirk if he was actually being held there. They would have surprise on their side only momentarily. And if in that moment they failed to find Kirk, they would not have another chance. Spock knew he would be risking the destruction of the *Enterprise* if he tried to stay near Staldat for any length of time. However one looked at it, the entire idea was filled with risk. But it was the sort of risk everyone aboard the *Enterprise* was willing to take.

Chekov was at the scanners until they were within range of Staldat, then Spock took over. He knew he could move more quickly than the young ensign. His mind would react faster to the proper readings. There would be only one Human. If Kirk was alive, his readings would make him reasonably easy to find. If there was time after that, Spock would scan for the dilithium.

McCoy was stationed in the transporter room. If they managed to find Kirk, there was every likelihood that he would be in bad shape. The Klingons had had him long enough to meet up with his stubborn resistance. Spock was familiar enough with their methods to know that they wouldn't waste a great deal of time on Kirk if he fought them successfully. Spock also suspected that they would use the mindsifter, and he doubted if Kirk could hold out against it for long.

The *Enterprise* did not slow down as she approached Staldat. Sulu was perched on the edge of his seat as he maneuvered the ship to within transporter range of the planet while still traveling at warp speed. The entire crew was braced for the sudden massive reverse of engines which would come if there was cause to use the transporter. The tension was electric. Everyone was busy at his or her station; teamwork among the crew had never been better. All waited tensely for Spock's command, hardly daring to hope.

"I have located the captain. Reverse engines now!" Spock's voice cut into the air like a knife. Kirk's coordinates were sent through the open line to the transporter room. People clung to stationary objects as the ship dropped into sublight velocity.

"We've got him, bridge!"

Instantly, Spock was scanning for dilithium. "Sulu," he said, his eyes glued to the readout, "Seventeen degrees to port." The big ship swung around as Spock quickly read out the new coordinates to the transporter room. Seconds ticked by like hours until an excited voice from the cargo bay acknowledged the successful transfer.

Just as Spock started to give the order to get away, the *Enterprise* was rocked by a direct phaser hit. "Photon torpedoes, Mr. Chekov," he said calmly, giving the target's speed and trajectory. The torpedoes flew from the *Enterprise*, and the Klingon ship disintegrated. Spock then ordered maximum warp; the *Enterprise* headed back for Federation territory.

"The Klingons are in pursuit," Spock said, his eyes glued to the scanners. "However, we have the element of surprise on our side." He moved to the command chair, giving the scanners back to Chekov. Sulu was flying an incredibly evasive course at top warp speed. One could only imagine the howl of protesting engines down in the lower levels.

"Mr. Sulu, you will continue evasive maneuvers after we reach Federation space. I doubt if the Klingons will let us go easily."

"Aye, sir."

Spock's assessment proved correct. But the short lead the *Enterprise* had proved to be just enough of a margin. Fast as the Klingon short-range vessels were, they couldn't quite get within firing range of the escaping starship. Finally the *Enterprise* flew deeper into Federation territory than the Klingons, even in their anger, were willing to go.

"They're breaking formation, Mr. Spock. I think they're turning back."

"Maintain warp eight, Mr. Sulu. I think it would be wise to get farther away from Klingon space before we assume they have given up."

It was another hour before Spock felt it was safe to leave the bridge. As the turbolift descended toward sickbay, he found his courage failing him. Short of the transporter chief's terse message that they had retrieved Kirk, he had had no news. He had no idea what condition Kirk had been in, or even if he was still alive.

McCoy had placed Kirk in the small isolation unit at the rear of the sickbay. The captain was wrapped in a water sheet, which Spock noted was adjusted to the coolest setting. Kirk would be still as death one moment, then wracked by huge tremors the next. McCoy was wiping Kirk's face with a damp cloth.

"What's wrong?"

McCoy didn't look up. "I don't know. He was delirious when we beamed him up. Since then his temperature has peaked at 39.5 degrees centigrade, and he's gone into convulsions several times. He doesn't seem to recognize me, and when he talks, he makes absolutely no sense." He wiped Kirk's face again. "Damn those Klingons!" He paused to look at the panel readings. "His temperature is finally starting to drop..."

As the doctor spoke, Kirk was seized with violent cramps. He tore out of the sheet as he jerked his knees up to his chest. McCoy grabbed for him but missed. Instantly, Spock moved to Kirk's side, wrapping his arms around him to prevent him from slipping off the bed.

Kirk clung to him desperately. His eyes opened, glazed and pain-filled as they slowly focused on Spock. Disbelief registered, then Kirk's body again started to shake. But his eyes didn't leave Spock's face.

"Spock...?" The voice was soft and as full of disbelief as the eyes. "Are you here?"

"Yes, Captain." Spock's grip tightened as Kirk's sweat-soaked body threatened to slip from his grasp.

"Spock, bring him over here." McCoy had placed a thick absorbent cover on another bed, and Spock lifted Kirk and carefully placed him on it. McCoy wrapped additional blankets around Kirk as the man's teeth started to chatter.

"B-B-Bones, you're here t-t-too?"

"Yes, Jim."

Kirk reached out a shaking hand and took hold of Spock's arm. "You're r-r-real? I'm not h-h-hallucinating?"

"You are on the Enterprise, Jim. We took you from the Klingons. You're safe now."

"The Enterprise...s-s-safe..." Kirk lay still for a moment, then another tremor shook his body. It seemed to be more than he could stand, for his eyes slowly closed and he drifted into unconsciousness.

"Doctor...?" Spock's voice betrayed the fear he felt. Kirk was so sick, so obviously abused.

McCoy was busy setting up an IV hypospray to replace the fluids Kirk was losing so quickly. "I have no idea what they've done, Spock. I've had some tests run, and there don't seem to be any unusual chemicals in his system. He's too weak to undergo much more at the moment." He finished what he was doing, then turned to Spock. "Would they have used the mind-sifter?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Would it cause this?"

"Negative, Doctor. Used on a Human, it could destroy certain brain functions, but it would not cause a reaction like this."

"Well, until he comes around again and can tell us a little about what happened, I don't dare give him much treatment."

Spock gazed at the worried, exhausted doctor. "McCoy, may I suggest that this might be a good time for you to get some rest? You have been through the strain of Mr. Scott's operation, as well as the captain's ordeal. I will stay until you return."

McCoy opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it. He knew he needed sleep and should get it now before things fell apart again. "All right. But call me if he regains consciousness."

Spock nodded and sat down beside Kirk. The Human was wrapped in a cocoon of blankets. An occasional tremor still shook him, but for the most part he slept undisturbed, the dark hollows around his eyes and his sunken cheeks mute testimony to the suffering he had endured.



McCoy quietly entered the sickbay, his eyes quickly taking in the sleeping Human. The blankets and pillows had been rearranged, and Kirk's hair was dry and neatly combed. Spock was sunk deeply in his chair, his fingers steepled in front of his face. McCoy smiled to himself and went to the other unit to check on Scott, who also proved to be sleeping peacefully. He was intercepted by a young ensign as he came back out.

"Excuse me, Doctor, but Starfleet is demanding further clarification of Commander Spock's last message. When I told him, he didn't pay any attention. He didn't even act like he knew I was there."

"I'll speak to him, son. You can return to your duties."

"Thank you, sir."

Spock straightened up as McCoy returned to the small unit. The Vulcan's expression told McCoy it wasn't worth

starting the argument about who should leave and who should stay. Spock had no intention of leaving.

"He's been asleep since you left, Doctor."

McCoy nodded and looked at the panel readings. "His temperature's normal. Everything else seems to be working properly..."

Just then Kirk stirred. They both held their breath as he opened his eyes. They were not filled with pain as they had been earlier, but were clear and shining. Only the dark circles under them told of enormous suffering. They looked puzzled for a moment, then startled. Kirk started to sit up, but McCoy pushed him back down.

"Not yet, Jim. Stay put."

Kirk gazed at him, then at Spock, finally reaching out his hand and taking hold of the Vulcan's arm, just as he had done hours earlier.

"I didn't dream it."

McCoy grinned. "You're looking at the newest galactic pirate, Captain. He left enough angry Klingons behind to start an intergalactic war. Which reminds me, Spock...Starfleet wants an update on your last report." He knew he had Spock backed into a corner.

"Starfleet can wait, Doctor."

"Spock," Kirk's voice was stern, "what report?"

Kirk listened in silence as Spock briefly related the events leading up to Kirk's rescue. A tiny smile of amusement played around Kirk's lips as he listened. It was as bold an act of sabotage as he had ever heard described. Spock had indeed learned something from his association with Humans.

"Spock, I think you'd better talk with Starfleet. Rub it into Komack's hide a little for me, will you?" Their gazes held for a moment, then Spock nodded slightly and left.

"Now, Jim," McCoy said, adjusting the blankets, "let's give you a really thorough going over."

An hour later McCoy stood back and studied Kirk. "How are you holding up?"

Kirk glanced up at him. "There's a young Klingon doctor who would be proud to make your acquaintance."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't think he'd ever seen a Human up close before. He pricked and poked and prodded almost as much as you do during one of your physicals."

"Thanks a lot," said McCoy sarcastically. Then his tone grew more thoughtful. "You liked him, didn't you?"

Kirk's expression reflected surprise. "What would give you that idea?"

"You've told me about the treatment you received from Kendat and Koth. There was very little in your voice but hate. That tone's missing when you talk about this man."

Kirk frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I can say I liked him. It's obvious he did experiments with me as the subject. Yet when I had a bad reaction, he seemed genuinely concerned." Kirk fell into a long silence.

"Jim," McCoy said, "I've gone over you thoroughly. I can't find traces of any foreign chemical in your system. There weren't any signs of one when you were beamed aboard, either."

Kirk frowned again and asked sharply, "Are you sure?"

McCoy nodded. "You're weak, there are signs of some muscle damage from the torture rod, bruises on your face from the mindsifter...but nothing to indicate that the seizures were chemically induced."

"Then the sickness is my own," Kirk said softly.

"What?"

Kirk drew a deep breath. "That's what he - the Klingon doctor - said, after I had the second attack. I was in their medvac, just before they used the mindsifter. I asked him why they needed me in such a weakened condition for the drug to work - the truth drug. He said they hadn't used one."

"Are you sure they didn't question you?"

"I'm not sure of anything. I remember periods between the seizures. Koth was definitely asking questions then, but with all the drama that a bully normally uses. I can't remember much after the seizures started - some shadowy figures and voices. But I don't think they were asking anything. Even if they were, I wasn't in any condition to give them useful information."

"And you aren't going to be in any condition to answer any more questions here if I keep you out of bed much longer," McCoy cautioned. Kirk was starting to look more pale, if that was possible, and there was nothing to be gained in overtaxing him. "Come on, you're going back to bed, and I'll go over the rest of these test results."



McCoy kept Kirk in Sickbay for two days, but he had no further recurrence of the strange illness. The Enterprise had received orders to divert to Starbase Six for Kirk's debriefing. He was the first Federation prisoner known to have escaped from Stalldat, and Starfleet was eager for information. He would also be allowed to press

charges against the officers of the *Dastan*. Kirk was slowly regaining strength and showed no more signs of the mysterious illness that might or might not have been induced by the Klingons.

And, as usual whenever he felt healthy, Kirk was being absolutely impossible. In self defense, McCoy finally let Kirk out of the sickbay, making him promise that he would take it easy and stay off-duty. As soon as Kirk left Sickbay, McCoy contacted Spock. He knew he couldn't trust Kirk to be on his own, and if Spock couldn't contain the captain, no one could.

With free time on his hands and the *Enterprise* quickly warping to Starbase Six, Kirk took the opportunity to wander through the ship, visiting departments that his busy schedule usually would not allow him to visit, talking with crewmembers he only had a nodding acquaintance with. At first, Spock wondered why he was taking this tour. Although Kirk claimed he felt all right, he still bore the signs of his intense suffering. He had lost weight and his face was thin and drawn, the dark circles under his eyes making them look huge. But Spock observed crewmembers' reactions to Kirk's presence, their obvious delight at seeing him standing alive and whole in front of them, and then he understood. This was Kirk's way of saying "thank you" to people who had willingly risked their lives to save his - a way of expressing gratitude that they would accept.

Kirk was finishing his tour as the *Enterprise* slowed to sublight in its approach to the starbase. He and Spock were making their way to Kirk's quarters; the captain was going to take a shower and get dressed to meet his superior officers. As Kirk pulled off his shirt, Spock again noticed the marks the Klingons' abuse had left on his body. His gaze traveled up the thin body to Kirk's face.

"Jim, are you sure you are up to this debriefing?"

Amusement shone out of Kirk's eyes. "I'm fine, Spock, honest." He sat down to pull off his boots. "If you're so worried about me, why don't you come along? I'm sure Bones will be going, and I know you want to find out what happened." He looked up at the Vulcan again. "I haven't had much time to talk with you...to thank you."

Spock dropped his gaze. How many times before had they had cause for this same conversation? There was never any answer for either of them. He drew a deep breath. "I would like to accompany you, Captain..."

Kirk smiled slightly at the words Spock left unspoken. "Good, that's settled then. I'll meet you in the transporter room in half an hour."



But when Spock and McCoy met in the transporter room at the specified time, Kirk wasn't there. Ten minutes later he still hadn't appeared, and there was no answer to Spock's call. They made a dash for Kirk's quarters, fear foremost in both their minds.

Kirk was lying half in and half out of the shower, the sonics still beating on his legs, which were red and blistered. The temperature control was set on maximum; presumably, Kirk had bumped into it as he fell. He was shivering violently. He pulled away from Spock, who was trying to help him up, and crawled to the far corner, whimpering. Spock tried again, but Kirk warded him off with surprising strength. McCoy tried to get to Kirk with a hypo, but the man's sudden kick landed the doctor flat on his back in the shower, the wind knocked out of him.

"Jim, don't..." Spock ducked another kick and grabbed Kirk's leg. Instantly he was sprawling on the floor. Kirk vaulted across him and scrambled into the next room. Spock stumbled to his feet and ran to the desk, hitting the automatic lock just before Kirk made it to the door. Kirk hit it with a heavy thud and collapsed slowly to the floor. McCoy came out of the head, having recovered his breath and his hypo. Kirk observed his approach with a look close to panic on his face. He pressed his back against the door.

"No, I won't talk. You can't force me!"

McCoy looked at Spock. "He's hallucinating, he doesn't know where he is." He slowly knelt down in front of Kirk. "Take it easy, Jim, nobody's going to hurt y--" McCoy's voice broke off as Kirk's leg struck out and the doctor was once again hurled to the far side of the room. Damn, McCoy thought as he got stiffly to his feet, this is getting painful.

Spock inched his way toward Kirk. The violent trembling of the Human's body was growing worse. Spock timed his strike; when McCoy's movement momentarily distracted Kirk, Spock's fingers closed on the base of Kirk's neck. Then McCoy moved to the intercom and sent for a medical team.



"My god, Spock," McCoy said, his voice grim, "he had to survive three of these attacks on his own!" Kirk was in the isolation unit, stripped and held in restraints, thick absorbent material under him to soak up the sweat that streamed from his body.

McCoy and Chapel were running tests, drawing blood, analyzing body chemistry. Spock stood in helpless silence, his heart aching for his friend, even though Kirk was in no condition to know what was happening.

"His temperature's up again, Doctor," Chapel reported tersely. "Respiration and pulse rate becoming more

rapid..."

"Water sheet, quickly," McCoy ordered, "minimum temperature setting. Monitor his brain wave activity carefully. If his temperature gets any higher, we're in real trouble."

Kirk's delirium increased, showing him horrors only the mind could create. His screams filled the small room until Spock had to turn away or risk losing control. He went to sit in McCoy's office, but his acute hearing continued to inform him of Kirk's agony.

McCoy saw Spock go and followed as soon as he could. He found Spock sitting with his eyes shut, his face drawn as though he were in physical pain. McCoy put his hand on Spock's shoulder.

"Can you do nothing for him, Doctor?"

Without words, McCoy knew that Spock was in contact with Kirk's living horror. "We've done our best, Spock."

"But he is so alone..."

McCoy nodded as he sat down beside the Vulcan. "I know."



The light hurt Kirk's eyes as his consciousness returned. He was held fast, his arms and legs strapped tight, and was wrapped in a cocoon of blankets to keep him warm. The seizure had lasted almost six hours. He moaned and tried unsuccessfully to move his head away from the light.

"Take it easy, Jim." McCoy's familiar, reassuring voice came from the end of the bed, where he was changing the dressings on severe burns caused by the sonics of the shower.

Kirk opened his eyes a little. He was in sickbay. He felt the same exhaustion that had accompanied the end of the seizures he had had at Staldat. He tried to shift his position a bit, but McCoy's hand on his thigh stopped him.

"Take it easy, you're okay now." He moved to Kirk's side. "You really gave us a scare."

"What happened?"

McCoy gave him quick details of the fight in Kirk's quarters. "We've got to pin this down, Jim. It's doing your body no good to keep going through this. Now that you're awake, I'm going to run some tests. If I unstrap you, promise you won't try to take me on again?"

Kirk gave him a weak grin, which McCoy returned before getting down to work. Kirk tried to stay awake and to answer McCoy's many questions, but he felt disoriented and finally started drifting in and out of consciousness.

Finally McCoy finished and allowed Kirk to fall into peaceful blackness. He took blood and tissue samples to the lab and settled down to a long night's work. Something was causing Kirk's illness, something he had missed. He was determined not to miss it again.



Kirk slept for fourteen hours. McCoy talked to the debriefing board, and they agreed to give Kirk time to recover before questioning him. Spock spent most of the day in his own debriefing, answering all questions concerning the Enterprise's part in Kirk's rescue and the recovery of the dilithium cargo. Now he was finally where he had been aching to be all day: at Kirk's side.

Kirk woke slowly. At first he looked puzzled, tensing his body against the restraints. Then his face registered recognition.

"It's all right, Jim," Spock said to reassure him. "You're on the Enterprise."

Kirk looked around the small room, at the monitors and computers that were taking constant readings of his vital signs. "They seem determined to keep me here," he said in a quiet voice.

"It won't be for long," said Spock as he got to his feet. "McCoy wanted to be notified when you woke up," he added, moving to the intercom.

When McCoy arrived, his heart sank at the scared look on Kirk's face, but he didn't let his fear sound in his voice. "Hello. Glad you're back."

"More tests?"

McCoy grinned. "You know how we medical folks are when we get hold of an interesting case, Jim-boy."

Spock watched Kirk's lack of response to McCoy's joking. He wasn't meeting this problem with his normal fight, but was withdrawing into himself.

"Bones," Kirk said in little more than a whisper, "I can't go through it again."

"Jim, you..."

"It's not just the seizures, it's the uncertainty. I thought it was something the Klingons caused, but if it isn't..." His face paled a little. "Bones..."

"Take it easy, Jim," McCoy admonished. Kirk didn't seem to hear him. McCoy's eyes darkened. He didn't like this reaction. "Jim, you feel like hell now because you're so run down. What you need is more sleep. You'll feel

better soon."

"Sure," Kirk said without conviction. He was no longer looking at McCoy, but lay staring at the ceiling. Spock glanced at McCoy, who shrugged and shook his head. "Doctor, I shall stay..."

"No, Spock," Kirk interrupted. "I'd rather be alone. The machines will make sure I don't do anything I'm not supposed to do." He glanced at Spock, then at McCoy. "Please, I'd just like to be by myself." Reluctantly Spock and McCoy left him alone, the machines surrounding him, clicking and whirring, impersonally recording every function of his mind and body.

As the door to the isolation unit slid shut behind them, McCoy put his hand on Spock's arm. "Come to my office, Spock. We've got real trouble."

Silent, Spock followed McCoy across the sickbay. When they were settled, McCoy continued. "I've found slight traces of a parasite in Jim's blood, but it's like nothing I've ever seen before. I've sent samples to Delta Nine. They've got the most advanced research center in this part of the galaxy..."

"It will take nearly a month to get an answer from that distance," said Spock.

"I know, believe me, I know. We need to go back over everything that's happened to Jim recently. He must have picked this up somewhere, but no one else has shown similar symptoms." He turned to Spock. "If anyone can find something, you can."

McCoy cleared his throat, and Spock studied his own folded hands, not meeting the doctor's gaze. "There is something else?"

"Yes." McCoy hesitated. "If this continues, if he has another seizure, we may have to relieve him of command."

Spock's head snapped up. "You realize what that would do to him?"

McCoy nodded. "I hate to think about it. But Jim knows it could happen. He's sick, Spock. Possibly for the first time in his life he's got a chronic physical problem that has yet to be explained, and it's threatening him psychologically. It could destroy his life without killing him."

Slowly Spock got to his feet. "There is an answer, Doctor. And I will find it."

"I hope so, Spock. For his sake, I hope so."



Kirk had no further relapses. Finally McCoy allowed the Starfleet debriefing team to come aboard the Enterprise. Such a compromise was the most he was willing to permit. McCoy allowed Kirk to meet with the team in his own quarters, rather than keeping him in Sickbay, but only with the understanding that the doctor and Spock would also be present.

The debriefing was exhaustive. As a trained Starfleet officer, Kirk was automatically observant of his surroundings, and he had missed little at Stalldat. He talked without interruption, telling everything he had seen and all that had happened to him. He gave the information in the form of a military report. McCoy was intrigued in spite of himself. He didn't see this side of Kirk very often. When Kirk finally finished, the officers he had been talking to exchanged glances. Then Admiral Sands spoke.

"You said you suspected you were drugged when you drank the water?"

Kirk hesitated for a moment. "I think that would have been their first opportunity, sir."

"No injection was administered?"

"Yes, sir, but that was later, when I was in their medvac..."

"Admiral," McCoy interrupted, "you have my medical report. I think that will answer any additional questions." He got to his feet. "Captain Kirk needs a break..."

Sands looked at Kirk, then nodded. "Very well, Doctor," he said as he got up. "I believe you have told us all we need, Captain. If we have any further questions, we'll contact you on patrol."

Spock left to escort the board members to the transporter room.

Kirk slumped in his chair and ran a hand over his face as the door slid shut.

"You okay, Jim?" McCoy asked anxiously.

"What?" Kirk dropped his hand. "Oh, yeah, I guess so. Why, do I look ready to fall apart?"

"No, but I wouldn't blame you if you did," said McCoy softly.

Kirk smiled slightly. "Maybe I will later. Right now I'm too tired." He glanced around his quarters. "Any chance you'd let me stay here tonight? Sickbay's nice enough, but this is more like home."

McCoy hesitated. In Sickbay he could monitor Kirk and not have to worry quite so much. But he couldn't resist the pleading look in Kirk's eyes. "Okay," he finally agreed, "but only if you promise to call me if you start to feel strange."

"You've got it," said Kirk, heading slowly for the shower. "I'll even leave my door unlocked so you can check

up on me if you want to."

Despite his relief at being out of the sickbay, Kirk found that he slept badly. His dreams were full of confused images of what had happened at Staldat, and he was absolutely exhausted by the time he got up.

"Ready to leave orbit, Captain," Sulu said as Kirk walked onto the bridge. "All systems have been cleared."

"Thank you." Kirk sat stiffly in the command chair, closing his eyes for a moment as the bridge suddenly became a blur.

"Captain?" Spock's soft voice sounded beside him.

Kirk opened his eyes. "Problem, Spock?"

Spock studied the Human, realizing that Kirk did not know how sick he looked. "No, sir," he said. "I simply thought..."

"I'm all right," said Kirk, suddenly understanding. "Leave orbit, Mr. Sulu. Warp one."

"Aye, sir, warp one."

Spock stayed where he was for a few more minutes, then moved to his station. The captain obviously wanted to be left alone, and he would honor that wish. But as he worked, he kept a careful eye on Kirk, just in case.

A short while later McCoy arrived, and he was obviously angry to find Kirk on the bridge. "Captain, I would appreciate your accompanying me to Sickbay."

"What for?" asked Kirk innocently.

"Spock, you've got the con," McCoy said, stepping back. "Captain..."

Kirk knew he would start a scene if he argued. He stood slowly, once again feeling the bridge momentarily spin around him. He made his way carefully to the turbolift. After the door slid shut, he slumped against the wall.

"You look awful," McCoy said.

"Thanks."

"Who said you could go back on duty?"

Kirk shut his eyes again to stop the spinning sensation. "I've been lying around long enough, Doctor."

"Baloney!" McCoy retorted.

Kirk opened his eyes, surprised by McCoy's response. "All right," he said, "maybe that isn't it. Maybe I'm really trying to find out if I'm still capable of command, or if..." His voice trailed away.

"Or if' what?"

"...if I should be grounded."

"Jim, you're still sick..."

"Yes, I'm sick. But what's wrong with me? Do you know? No, you don't know! I know how I feel, Bones. I'm not going to be able to hold onto my command if I have to contend with whatever this is for much longer."

"We'll lick it."

Kirk eyed him skeptically. "Before it does me in? Before I have to relinquish my command?"

"You giving up?"

"No. Not yet, anyway." Kirk slowly pushed himself back onto his feet as the turbolift came to a halt. "Do you really want me to come to the sickbay?"

"How much sleep did you get last night?"

"Not a whole lot. I wasn't enjoying the dreams."

"You're coming to Sickbay. After I check you over, you can go to your quarters. I'll give you something to chase away the dreams."



The days dragged by. Kirk had no seizures, but he still felt awful. He tried hard to be cheerful around the crew, and to them he appeared little different from his usual self. Spock and McCoy saw a different man. They saw a frightened man who was living a nightmare with no end in sight. They saw a man who was being drained of fight by growing exhaustion. McCoy's pills were not helping. Even allowing Kirk to go back on duty didn't seem to help his morale much.

True to his word, Kirk no longer locked the door to his quarters. McCoy had taken to checking him a different hours during the night, and Spock had done likewise. Kirk had admitted that nights were the worst for him - the long hours dragging past when he found sleep difficult and was almost scared to let himself drift.

The door to the captain's quarters slid open when McCoy placed his hand on the entry plate. Kirk was lying on top of his bed. He had kicked off his boots, and his uniform shirt lay on the floor. McCoy noted additional weight loss. Kirk's face was drawn, looking almost fragile. Tousled hair spilled down over his tall forehead, and fair eyelashes - longer and thicker than any McCoy had ever seen - lay on his damp cheeks.

"His cheeks are wet! Jim, are you all right?"

"No." The voice was low and unsteady.

"Seizure?"

"No." Kirk sat up abruptly. "God, if only it was that simple!" He turned to face McCoy, and the doctor felt shock flow through him as he realized that Kirk had been lying in the dark by himself - crying.

"Can I help?"

Kirk smiled lamely, his brimming eyes belying his attempt to be cheerful. "Can anyone help? I've never felt like this before. Being injured is one thing...but with this I feel so...helpless. I'm going to lose everything that's important to me - my ship, my crew..." His voice broke and he got to his feet, blindly making his way across the room. "Bones," he said, his voice now definitely shaking, "what's wrong with me?"

Kirk heard McCoy move over to him, then a gently warmth surrounded him as McCoy hugged him close. "I don't know, Jim, but you're not going to lose everything. You feel like this because you're a Human being, a man who is sick and scared." He guided Kirk to the bed. "You've got every reason to be scared, but we're bound to hear from Delta Nine soon. Just hold on a while longer..."

"I can't," Kirk said, his voice muffled, his head buried in McCoy's shoulder.

"Then don't cry alone. Let it go now while I'm here. If I can't help you yet as a doctor, I can still be here as a friend." He reached up and pressed Kirk's head close. "There's only the two of us. Come on, let it go..."

After a visible struggle, Kirk finally began to cry, in an awkward and unpracticed way at first, and then more easily. McCoy held him firmly. It was the only medicine he could give.

A few moments later, the door slid open and Spock walked in. Kirk pressed himself more tightly against McCoy, and at first the doctor was afraid that he was again struggling for control. Then he felt Kirk sag and knew the crisis had passed. He met Spock's worried gaze over Kirk's head. "It's all right, Spock," he said quietly, "it's a Human way of facing trouble."

McCoy waited until Kirk had cried himself out, then helped him undress and get into bed. Kirk lay curled up like a small child, his face flushed, his eyes red and swollen. McCoy got a wet cloth and carefully washed him, then pulled the blankets high.

"All right now?"

Kirk nodded, his breath still catching a little in his throat. "Thanks," he said in a near-whisper.

"What are doctors for?" McCoy asked gently. Then he turned to Spock. "You in a hurry to go anywhere?"

"No, Doctor."

"Good. I think the captain would like some company." He put his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "I'll see you in the morning, Jim."

McCoy only just made it to his quarters before his own tears spilled over. He had held his emotions firmly in check because Kirk had needed him, and the effort had drained him more than he had realized. But he had left behind a much stronger man, so it was worth the cost.



McCoy was running yet another test on the elusive parasite in Kirk's blood when Spock walked into the lab.

"Doctor, I believe I may have found something."

McCoy looked up at him. "I hope so. This little bug has me running in circles."

"Jim and I have traced every step he has taken over the last six months..."

"And?"

"The only place I didn't accompany him was Platan VII. I suspect he might have contracted this malady when he was there."

"It's no good, Spock. I've already thought of that. Five other people were there with him, and none of them has had any problems."

"Have you checked them out thoroughly?"

McCoy gazed at Spock in sympathy, knowing that he had already conducted the appropriate tests. Then he reached for the intercom. It wouldn't hurt to do them again. "Lieutenant Uhura, would you contact Lieutenant McMaster and get him down here to sickbay? Then find out which security personnel were with Captain Kirk and the lieutenant on Platan VII, and have them report also."

"Aye, sir."

"Anything else, Spock?"

"Just an idea, Doctor. It might give us a lead, it might not. It's something I'd planned to look into some time ago but never had the chance."

"Well, good luck with your hunting."

Spock nodded. "And you with yours."

Kirk was just getting dressed when Spock arrived at his quarters. "Captain, do you still have the transcript which accompanied the Platan VII orders?"

Kirk looked at him with curiosity. "I think so. So much had happened that I haven't had a chance to log them. Let's see..." He rummaged through a pile of tapes. "Here it is," he said, holding one out. "What's up?"

"I am playing one of your hunches," Spock said. He studied Kirk, knowing that the Human would be less likely to fall into another depression if he kept busy. "I could use some help if you're not doing anything else at the moment."

"Nothing pressing. I think McCoy is letting me go back on duty, although considering the way I acted last night, I'm not sure I'm ready."

"You had a healthy emotional reaction, Captain," said Spock, his eyes soft with understanding. "No one should hold it against you, least of all you yourself."

"Yeah, well, let me tell Sulu where I'll be, then you've got your worker. Uh, where will I be working?"

"Records department."



The intercom blasted through McCoy's concentration. It was Spock, and he almost sounded excited. "Doctor, I would suggest you focus your search on tropical diseases of pre-Eugenics War Earth, say late nineteenth, early twentieth century."

"Why?"

"I would rather refrain from expressing a hasty hypothesis. Jim and I 'have a lead going'."

"The captain's with you?"

"Buried in a stack of tapes. Spock out."

McCoy sat staring at the viewscreen. Spock might appear to be cold and unemotional, but he always seemed to know what Kirk needed. What better therapy than to keep him busy tracking down the answer to his own problem? McCoy reached for the intercom and summoned his lab team. He would give each of them a sample of Kirk's blood and instructions to look for parasitical diseases that it was likely none of them had ever seen.



"Spock, I've got something." Spock came up to study the screen over Kirk's shoulder. It displayed the picture of a young man, ruggedly built, with an oddly sallow complexion. The Vulcan quickly read through the name and rank, then finally the man's medical record.

"That's it," he said quietly. "It's got to be."

"Jim, Spock!" McCoy came bursting in the door. "We've isolated it - the parasite! The bug, whatever you call it. It's incredible. It's a disease which to all intents and purposes was eradicated two centuries ago! It's..."

"Malaria," Spock supplied.

"How'd you know?" McCoy asked in astonishment.

Spock glanced at Kirk. "Something Jim once said triggered the hypothesis. We were sent to Platan VII to investigate the possibility that interference from Human contact had occurred before the Prime Directive went into effect. It occurred to me that the planet's original visitors might have brought the disease with them. So we traced back on our records all known parties who had contact with the planet."

"Take a look," Kirk said, indicating the screen. "Gregory Stargar, engineering assistant, health good except for malarial remission, treated by drugs."

"There is also our record of what the landing party said during debriefing," Spock added, "that the natives were yelling something about a 'Gregory' not being allowed to kill again. There is much insect life on Platan VII. As you no doubt know, malarial protozoa breed very rapidly. It is probable that they mutated to inhabit a new insect host. It is likely that the natives have developed an immunity to the disease through long exposure, but that they were susceptible to it when Gregory Stargar first arrived. As a visitor, Jim had no protection against the disease. And he alone of the landing party suffered numerous insect bites."

"The problem is," Kirk concluded glumly, "what do we do about it?"

"That's simple enough as far as you're concerned," said McCoy. "I've already looked it up. Amodraquine is a synthetic drug - easily manufactured. They used it for years to keep this thing under control."

"Control isn't good enough, Bones. I can't keep command when I've got something like this. What would happen if I had an attack? I could lead the ship to disaster! How much am I affected by the disease? How would this amodraquine affect me?"

"I can't answer that, Jim."

"Can you stand there and honestly tell me you wouldn't relieve me of command if I had another attack?"

"No," said McCoy, wishing he could drop dead on the spot.

"Excuse me, gentlemen." Kirk made a hasty exit toward the door.

"Jim..."

"Doctor," Spock said, catching McCoy by the sleeve. "We still have a lot of work to do, and contacting Delta Nine is top priority."

"But, Jim..."

"Delta Nine first, Doctor, then the amodraquine. After that we can deal with the problems as they arise."



Kirk yawned and stretched like a contented cat, his skin bronzed from Ridan's hot sun. He finally rolled over and sat up, running a hand over his face. "Have I been asleep long?"

McCoy smiled, his frosted mint julep glinting in the sun as he moved it from behind the book he'd been reading. "About four hours, but you might as well enjoy it. We go back on duty tomorrow."

Kirk made a face. "I know." He scanned his surroundings, taking in the lake and the hills around it. "Remember when I wondered if we'd ever get back here again?"

"Um hum. I believe you said, 'how often do we get to do something like this?' I would say quite often, if recent weeks are any indication."

"Spare me, Bones, I won't be around much longer if I have to go through that again!"

"Not to worry, Captain. Delta Nine came up with an effective cure for your problem once we were able to convince them that you really did have malaria." McCoy smiled slightly. It had been the Deltans who had recommended that Kirk have a month's leave while the medication eliminated the malarial parasites present in his blood. So, along with Spock, they had returned to Ridan. The *Enterprise* had been due for a routine overhaul, which Scott was supervising - the first work McCoy had allowed him to do since his operation. There were all kinds of therapy.

Kirk had remained healthy during their stay, with no adverse reactions to the medication, and was slowly gaining back the weight he had lost. At first McCoy had kept a careful eye on him, but as the days passed, he left Kirk more and more to his own devices. To begin with, Kirk had been content to lie on the dock and sleep, taking an occasional swim to cool off, but after a couple of weeks he was accompanying Spock on his never-ending wanderings to collect data. He gradually regained his boisterous energy, and the image of the terribly sick man faded from memory.

Kirk grinned as McCoy stopped talking. "You know, I can't help but think about those poor Klingons. It makes sense now, but at the time I was sure they'd drugged me, and they didn't have clue number one as to what was wrong with me. They kept asking me if I was acting normally, and I kept telling them to tell me." He shook his head. "What a circus that was."

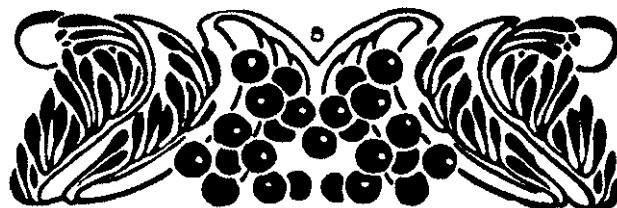
McCoy smiled as well. "Maybe it was lucky in a way, Jim. From what you've said, they kept having to give you time to recover, and that time could have been spent in some rather gruesome ways..."

Kirk nodded. "Yeah, it gave Spock the time he needed to get me out of there."

They sat silent for a moment, then McCoy looked up as Spock came walking down the hill onto the dock where they were sitting, his attention focused on his tricorder. "Speaking of time to get out of here," McCoy continued, "I really do think it's time we left. I'm sure he's run out of things to discover on this particular planet."

Kirk nodded. "I feel the same way, Bones. It's a nice place, but we don't belong here." He gazed up at the sky. "That's our home out there - the entire galaxy. Once you're allowed to fly free, it's impossible to stay planetside..." His voice died away as he watched a small flock of birds soaring above the waters of the lake, - kindred spirits of a different world.

McCoy smiled. Kirk was back. It had been a long, hard struggle, but his spirit was again longing to soar like the birds - and McCoy and Spock were ready to soar with him.





These resembled the others who had been brought to her,
Yet so different.
The others were terrified, with no caring
Only coldness.
From the beginning these had cared about her,
About each other.
These tried
But could not protect her from them.
Yet it was for her he worried;
It was to her he sent
The blue eyed one who had worried about the pain
The one in gold endured.
Yet the hazel eyes held more concern for her
Than for himself.
She reached out to discover
And found compassion,
Which made the pain easier to bear.
When escape seemed possible these took her;
The others had run alone.
She felt their horror when they discovered the others
And what their future held.
Yet when these had a chance they did not kill
As the others had tried to do.
And as these ran they did not fight
But helped, encouraged, cared.
Then they were there
And wanted a life.
He gave his willingly, allowing no argument.
She felt the helpless despair of the blue eyes,
Saw naked defeat in the brown.
Then it was happening
As it had happened before,
Only this time there was no terrified begging,
Only a plea for meaning,
The meaning of an ending.
Fear gripped her heart as she touched him,
The coldness of death flowed through her

And she ran.
But the emotion from the ring of light
Forced her to turn and look.
He had not been afraid to give his life...
She tried, she gave as much as she could,
But it was not enough to completely heal;
The fear was too strong to allow total control.
Then they came again
And added a burden he could not take.
The ones in blue knew,
Their emotion, their caring, filled her being.
The blue eyes made a decision
And the one in gold slept.
Brown eyes were relieved,
His emotion stilled - the decision made.
Understanding came as her hand reached out,
A first smile touched her lips.
Then the blue eyes moved and the emotion flowed
From brown eyes to blue to her
Because of him.
Her eyes were wet with unknown tears
As the blue eyes held hers, then vanished.
But these were stronger,
They could give their lives,
Something she could not do
Until she heard the emotion of their voices,
Emotion growing ever more familiar,
And then she knew what must be done.
The fear/denial loosed its hold
And these three were free.
So too was she
To walk upon a brave new world,
Unafraid to touch and hold
The memory, and yes, the love
For warm blue eyes who
Loved the brown
Who loved the one in gold.





THE ANSWER

Love? Do I love? I walk
Within the brilliance of another's thought,
As in a glory. I was dark before,
As Venus' chapel in the black of night;
But there was something holy in the darkness,
Softer and not so thick as others were;
And a rich moonlight may be to the blind,
Unconsciously consoling. Then love came,
Like the out-bursting of a trodden star.

- Thomas Lovell Beddoes
"The Second Brother"

"Oh, shit!" said Kirk as he reached forward to silence the persistent summons of the intercom. Spock sighed quietly to himself. Kirk had been in an irritable mood the past couple of days and by the comment he had just made, this one wasn't going to be any better. "Yes, Lieutenant, what is it?"

Uhura hesitated, visibly startled by the annoyance in Kirk's voice. "Message coming in from Starbase Twelve, sir."

Kirk uttered something under his breath which even Spock's sensitive ears couldn't hear clearly. Then he sighed. "On my way, Lieutenant. Kirk out."

Uhura leaned back in her chair and let go the breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. It wasn't often that Kirk was angry, but the voice that had answered her call had been dripping icicles. She decided she had better look busy when Kirk arrived on the bridge or she might have her head handed to her.

The turbolift doors opened and both Kirk and Spock stepped out. Spock headed right for the science station, but Kirk stopped just outside the doors and glared at Uhura, his expression saying what his words never would.

"Nothing yet, sir," she said in a small voice.

Kirk's face hardened for a minute, then his eyes softened. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

She smiled at his unspoken apology, then her attention was caught by an incoming message. "Admiral Komack is coming on now, sir."

The preliminaries, as always where Komack was concerned, were short. "Captain, when are you due to arrive at Minara 11?"

"Not until 5121.8, sir. We've cut back to warp one. We've had a couple of difficult eissions..."

"Yes, I've just read your report concerning the Tholians."

Spock stiffened at the disapproval in Komack's voice. It was obvious Komack had not liked what he had read: a starship endangered for one man, and a man he was not overly fond of. Kirk glanced at the Vulcan, knowing that Spock would be uncomfortable.

Their eyes met. Spock's were wary, but Kirk's expression could only mean 'Damn the man...!' Spock's hands went neutrally behind his back, but he held onto the console behind him with his full strength. Once again Kirk was putting him ahead of everything, trying to protect him, showing that he cared.

No, more than that he cared. Showing that he loved Spock. It had never been expressed in words, and Spock had

never even guessed the depth of Kirk's feelings until that moment on the Melkotian planet when he had melded with the others to save their lives. With both Scott and McCoy he had met resistance and fear. In Kirk he had found trust, belief and, incredibly, something more. Kirk had not hidden any of his emotions as Spock's mind had reached out and met the human's, and Spock had been unsettled to discover an unspoken truth - the friendship that James Kirk had held out to him, the friendship that he had finally answered had, for one of them, turned to love.

Spock found it almost impossible to live with that knowledge. It was a responsibility he could not cope with, a responsibility he did not want. Friendship was a bond of trust - love was something even more. Spock could not relate or respond to the emotion either as a Vulcan or a human. Vulcans controlled their emotions, but they were not afraid to express either admiration for, or love of, another Vulcan. The outstretched fingers showed, in the simple act, the depth of their caring. All his life Sarek had disapproved of the human emotion raging within his son, and had held back the usual affection shown a son by his father. Amanda, knowing that she was being closely watched by others to see if she would 'spoil' Spock by showering him with love as would a normal human, held her emotions in check. So neither parent had taught Spock how to love. They left within him a void, which by himself he could never fill. It had taken him a long time to reach out and accept Kirk's friendship. He wasn't ready for the next step - the one Kirk had taken - and he didn't know if he ever would be.

He struggled to bring his mind back to the present. Kirk was no longer looking at him, but had his attention back on the screen, the cold image of Admiral Komack still standing clear.

"Since you have five days until you are due to pick up the scientists on Minara II, you are ordered to divert to Argan IV. There are some unusual readings coming from there and Starfleet wants to know if they pose a threat to the freighters working in that area."

Kirk managed to prevent a scowl only by sheer will power. It didn't require a starship to register radiation readings, but he had had enough head-on clashes with Komack to know that arguing was useless.

"You understand, sir, that we may have to leave that area even if we have not satisfied Starfleet, in order to make our scheduled rendezvous time."

"Noted. However, I am sure that the Enterprise is resourceful enough to cope with what is, no doubt, a simple problem. Komack out."

The red flush of temper crept up Kirk's face. There were very few officers of command rank that Kirk didn't respect. Komack, unfortunately, was one of them, and he was Kirk's direct superior in this sector.

He took a deep breath, then moved down to the command chair. "Mr. Chekov, plot a course to Argan IV." He stood in silence while the ensign calculated.

"Course 172 mark 7, Captain. At warp two, estimated arrival time, stardate 4997.1."

"All right, Mr. Sulu, lay it in. Mr. Spock, you have the con. I'll be in Sickbay."

With a headache, thought Spock as he started forward. How often the strain of command threatens the fragile human structure.

"Acknowledged, Captain."



"You need a vacation, Jim."

Kirk took the pills McCoy handed him with an amused look on his face. "What brought that on, Bones?"

"The increasing number of headaches you've been getting, the lousy shape you're in, the fact that you're both too tired and too busy to get enough exercise."

Kirk swallowed the pills, then their eyes met. McCoy hadn't mentioned the thing which had so drained Kirk emotionally that the captain still found living with it difficult - the death of Miramane, the beautiful, innocent child with whom he had so briefly shared his life and his love in the paradise which could never be his.

"We're due for R & R after we pick up the scientists on Minara II. I think I can hold out until then."

"What's going to happen between now and then?"

"Nothing, I hope."

McCoy looked at him skeptically, then turned to put the pills away. "Have you talked to Spock yet?"

Kirk didn't try to keep the anger and frustration out of his voice. "No. Every time I try there's always some damn interruption. Komack's crazy diversion was just another in a long line." He looked at McCoy. "I take it you still don't agree with me."

McCoy shook his head. "Spock's mind works differently from yours and mine. He knows how close he came to killing you on Platonius, but he's the one who has to accept that it wasn't his fault. Right now he sees only what might have happened, not what the cause was. Don't push, Jim. You're opening up a whole store of emotions he's

always avoided. You've got to allow Spock to take it at his own speed."

For a moment their eyes held, then Kirk turned and headed for the door. "Thanks for the pills. I'll see you later." McCoy opened his mouth to say something more, then decided against it. He had made his point. Now it was up to Kirk and Spock to work it out.

Kirk's head was still pounding when he returned to the bridge. Spock's eyes were dark with worry as he looked at Kirk. The captain could usually manage to conceal how he felt from everyone but Spock and McCoy - and he was obviously hurting now.

"Anything to report, Mr. Spock?"

"Nothing, sir, everything is quiet." He stood at the side of the command chair, unsure of what to do next.

Kirk looked at him, knowing what the Vulcan wanted to say. "Don't worry, Spock, Bones has just told me I look awful."

"Perhaps, Captain, you might take this time to rest..."

"No, thank you, Spock. Solitude is one thing I don't want at the moment."

A slight frown showed momentarily on Spock's face, then his brow cleared. "Might I then suggest we go to your quarters and finish the conversation that was interrupted earlier?"

A smile crossed Kirk's face. This time they wouldn't be interrupted and he could get things out in the open. He instinctively disagreed with McCoy. Spock needed to know that what he had done on Platonius was something that any of them could have been forced to do, and he knew he would be able to get Spock to accept it. "Good idea, Spock," he said, getting up. "Mr. Sulu, you have the con."



Spock had long since gone and the ship was settled for the night. Kirk lay on his bed, fully awake. He had not bothered to undress; his boots and uniform shirt lay on the floor where he had tossed them. The black trousers and shirt brought out the paleness of his features, accenting the absence of his usually healthy tan.

He was beginning to dread the nights - the long hours when he was left alone with his memories. For a while he had taken the red pills that McCoy had given him, but finally stopped. Drugs were not going to help his problem. Only time could do that and, at the moment, time could not pass quickly enough.

Taking a deep breath, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. McCoy had said he needed more exercise; since he couldn't sleep, maybe he should take advantage of the free time and have a workout in the gym.

The large room echoed hollowly as he walked in and activated the lights. He had rarely been there when it was empty and it seemed strange, almost alien. He smiled at his overactive imagination as he walked to one of the weight machines. He stretched out, hooking his ankles under the bar and started to work.

The machine moved in an easy, rhythmic fashion to the command of Kirk's straining body. He forced himself to keep the pace brisk, although his leg and stomach muscles were soon protesting. The machine moved on and on until finally Kirk dropped the bar and lay panting while he regained his breath.

He got up from the machine and looked around, wondering what he should do next. Suddenly he decided he would run laps around the gym - he hadn't done anything like that for months. Pacing himself gently, he allowed his mind to relax as he jogged along. He started doing a few wind sprints, then began timing his runs, competing against himself, trying to see how fast he could cover the distance.

Suddenly the muscles in his right leg seized in a violent cramp. His speed took him unchecked onto the floor, where his head struck the hard surface. He rolled twice, then lay still.



"Sickbay to Mr. Spock."

The summons woke him instantly. "Spock here."

"Better get down here right away, Mr. Spock. Jim was found unconscious in the gym - don't know anything more, yet."

"I shall be there momentarily, Doctor."

Spock was dressed and on his way to Sickbay in a matter of minutes. When he entered he saw Kirk lying limp and pale on a diagnostic bed. He looked at the indicators on the panel, which hovered at or near Kirk's normal readings. He breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"What happened?"

McCoy glanced up. "Don't know. When Sulu went into the gym early this morning to work out, he found Jim lying

unconscious on the floor. There doesn't seem to be any...Wait a minute..." His fingers probed the side of Kirk's head. "He's got a beauty of a lump here. He must have hit his head on something hard, probably the floor."

Spock moved forward. "His dress indicates he was working out. Why would he undertake such an activity in the middle of the night?"

"Beats me. I told him he was in lousy shape. Guess he took it to heart. Well, I'll get some Masiform D. That should bring him out of it. There doesn't seem to be any severe head injury."

Spock stood looking down at the pale, unconscious man, hot tears stinging at the backs of his eyes. Kirk could have died, hurt and alone, even on a ship full of people. He reached forward, his hand automatically feeling Kirk's pulse. It throbbed strong and steady. As he took his hand away, he brushed the hair back from Kirk's forehead. Why was he having such a reaction to a simple injury? Why did he feel like this when Kirk's life was so obviously not in danger?

When McCoy returned, Spock's hands were again behind his back in his normal attitude of quiet attention. He watched as the hypo was pushed home, then they stood and waited.

The figure on the bed stirred, then Kirk moved his hand to his head. "Who hit me?"

McCoy grinned and looked at Spock, whose eyebrows rose slightly.

Kirk started to sit up but McCoy pushed him back. "Stay put, Jim. By the looks of things, you lost an argument with the gym floor. What in blazes were you doing there at such a ridiculous hour?"

"Couldn't sleep. Guess I was trying to work off some tension."

"Um. Well, you can work off tension by sleeping right here!" McCoy held up his hand as Kirk started to object. "I don't want to hear a peep out of you. You're not getting out of here until I'm satisfied you haven't suffered any damage. Now, you rest. I'm going to get some breakfast, then I'll be back to check on you. I'll get Christine to bring you some food and, if your stomach doesn't rebel at the thought, I want you to eat all of it. You coming, Spock?"

"I will join you in a minute, Doctor."

McCoy looked from Spock to Kirk, then grunted and walked out.

As Spock opened his mouth to speak, Kirk beat him to it. "Spare me the lecture, Spock. I know it was foolish to work out alone, but I'm all right."

"You could have been seriously injured, Captain, perhaps even died before anyone found you."

"And that worries you, Spock..."

Spock's eyes darkened. It didn't worry him as much as it scared the living daylights out of him and left him feeling sick at the thought of finding Kirk dead. Each time anything happened to Kirk it left him more unsettled than the last, and he didn't understand why.

"Yes, Captain, it..."

An exclamation of pain from Kirk cut him off. The captain grabbed his right leg and folded in agony. Spock quickly reached for the intercom, then returned to Kirk.

"My leg!"

Spock threw the thermal sheet aside and took hold of Kirk's leg. The cramped muscles stood out in tight knots. Kirk winced as Spock's hand came into contact with them.

The doors opened and McCoy came bursting through. He took one look at Kirk writhing on the bed and grabbed a hypo. Within seconds, Kirk's movements slowed, giving McCoy time to look at his leg. A low whistle escaped him.

"If that happened when he was running, it's no wonder he knocked himself cold!" He reset the hypo. Muscle relaxant - it'll help the tranquilizer in a minute."

Gradually Kirk's breathing slowed as the medication took hold.

"Feel better?"

Drugged hazel eyes looked at him. "Uh...much."

"All right, try to get some sleep. Spock, I'd like to talk to you for a minute." Spock took a last look at Kirk, then followed McCoy into his office. As the door slid shut, the doctor turned to look at him.

"Spock, I'm going to keep Jim here for a few days. When I told him yesterday he was in lousy condition, I meant it, both physically and mentally. Something's got to get him to slow down, to let go. It's obvious that Starfleet isn't going to let anyone on this ship have a break, and if Jim fights me on this one I'm going to need your help."

Spock nodded. "I shall do what I can, Doctor."

Spock returned to find Kirk sleeping peacefully. He stood for several moments looking at him, then turned and left.

McCoy stood at the door to his office watching him. When are you going to admit it, Spock? he wondered.

When are you going to face the fact that you love that man? Someday that knowledge is going to hit you hard and you're going to understand what that get feeling you've been fighting really is. And I wonder if you're man enough to accept it?



Kirk surprised both McCoy and Spock by being a cooperative patient. He spent most of his time sleeping - for the first time since Miramanee's death, he dropped the front he had been holding up. He retreated into himself and let life go on without him. McCoy watched him carefully; Spock visited regularly, but did not bother Kirk with unnecessary problems.



"That's it, Mr. Spock. That's the only source of radiation in the entire area." Sulu glanced up from his scanner as Spock straightened from his sensors.

"I agree with you, Mr. Sulu. Simple electromagnetic waves from a natural source with no possibility of causing harm in any way."

"Some freighter was probably just fooling around, daring Starfleet to take them seriously. And that sent us on a wild goose chase..."

"They certainly managed to do it," said Chekov, his face glum. "They had us warping here when we could have finally had a couple of days of peace. If I could get my hands on them..."

"A proper report will be filed, Mr. Chekov," said Spock quietly. "In the meantime, plot a course for Minara II."

"The course is already plotted, Mr. Spock. It will take 48.2 hours at warp six in order to make our rendezvous time."

High warp speed for absolutely no reason, thought Spock to himself. At a time when the crew needs rest - they will have to stay on alert. Outwardly he showed no emotion. "All right, Mr. Sulu, ahead warp six."

"A natural radiation source!" Kirk was furious, and obviously feeling better.

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Damn Komack, anyway! When I send in that report I'm going to burn his bottom!"

"Jim, it would not do any good."

The hazel eyes cleared. "No, I suppose it wouldn't. Sure would be fun to try, though. When do we get to Minara?"

"We should arrive in 6.412 hours, Captain. However, I am concerned...."

"About what?"

"Lt. Uhura has been unable to establish communications with the scientists stationed there. As far as she can ascertain, their receiver is still functioning..."

"But they don't answer. What's happened to them?"

"Unknown, Captain."

Kirk swung his feet over the side of the bed and hopped down onto the floor. "When Bones gets back, tell him I've discharged myself. I want you and McCoy to beam down with me - there's something funny going on here and I want to find out what."

Spock's stomach twisted with the familiar feeling he still couldn't define. "Jim, are you sure you're..."

"Spock," said Kirk gently, "don't worry about me so much. I've had a few hard knocks recently, but I'm all right. Bones has helped - and so have you, far more than you'll ever know."

A hard lump welled up in Spock's throat and he had to clear it before he could speak. "Jim, I..."

"Let's get ready to beam down, shall we?"

Spock looked at him, puzzlement strong in the brown eyes. Kirk smiled slightly. One day Spock would find his own answer.



The first hours on Minara did nothing to relieve the now all too familiar tension that twisted through Spock. Kirk was injured almost as soon as they arrived - minor, he said, but McCoy's eyes disagreed.

Then Kirk was gone, taken from them. Once again Spock experienced the terrible feeling of pain and loneliness. He didn't have time to analyze it - McCoy was at his elbow, pushing, complaining, and as worried about Kirk as Spock was. Then Kirk was there, and Spock, held trapped by the alien energy force, found it impossible to control his emotions as he watched Kirk's suffering, seeing him dying before his eyes as he was held helpless.

Gee worked her miracle, McCoy added his medical knowledge and Kirk slept. Spock sat beside him, feeling the

need to be close. As he sat there he thought of Kirk's words in Sickbay. "Bones has helped - and so have you..."

Suddenly the answer was there - a phrase, underlined, in a small book his mother had given him. Words not thought of for years now stood clearly in his mind. As Gee touched his shoulder, she knew what he had just discovered. The reason for the feelings he had been experiencing was now clear, and he wondered why he had been so blind to it for so long. Maybe it was because he feared the word - because of the name, he would not admit what he felt to himself.

The Vians bowed under Kirk's relentless pressure; McCoy was saved. As always, Kirk had neglected to say how much pain he still felt. As they materialized aboard the Enterprise, he lost control and folded.

"Come on, Spock, we've got to get him into the pressure chamber, quickly!"

The two of them supported a half-conscious Kirk to Sickbay. McCoy didn't even take the time to get Kirk into patient coveralls, but bundled him into the chamber and set the valves. Spock watched anxiously until he saw Kirk start to relax as the pain subsided.

"He'll be all right now, Spock. Why don't you try to get some rest? He'll be there for about six hours."

Spock nodded and, after a last look at Kirk, left for his quarters. He felt totally drained.

Searching through his belongings, he finally found the small book his mother had given to him the day he left for the Academy. "I brought it from Earth, Spock. It helped me through many lonely hours. It helped me to understand why I came to Vulcan. Maybe one day its words may help you."

He had accepted it and read through it a few times, but the words carried the emotions of humans and made little sense to him, so he had put it away. Until that afternoon he had not thought of it again.

Suddenly he knew how he could tell Kirk that he now understood what Kirk already knew, and that he was no longer running from the truth. He picked up the octavo and left for Kirk's quarters.



McCoy walked with Kirk the short distance from the Sickbay to the captain's quarters. Kirk was very tired but no longer in pain, so McCoy decided to let him spend the night in his own quarters. As Kirk slowly undressed, McCoy pulled the covers down on the bed, moving a small book to the shelf above it. He helped Kirk in, then pulled the covers up.

"You sure you're all right?"

Kirk smiled. "A good night's sleep is the only thing I want. Don't worry, Bones. I'm fine."

"Okay. Call me if you have another attack. Oh, I moved your book onto the shelf if you're looking for it. See you in the morning."

McCoy didn't notice Kirk's puzzled expression over his last statement. As the door slid shut behind the doctor, Kirk sat up and picked up the book. Opening it, he saw the name of the owner - Amanda Grayson. The book must belong to Spock. Why was it here? Turning to the page marked with a small ribbon, he read the underlined passage. A smile slowly crossed his face.



Kirk did not talk to Spock about what had happened. He returned the book and Spock received it in slightly embarrassed silence. But both knew that words were unnecessary - each understood the feelings of the other.

Weeks later, an innocent visit to an old friend while delivering lifesaving drugs turned into a nightmare. Kirk and Spock were held at the mercy of a brilliant man who had crossed that very thin line between genius and insanity. Garth of Izar - a legendary hero - now held power to destroy the galaxy, and Kirk was the only man standing between him and ultimate disaster.

But how did one deal with insanity - dangerous, ambitious insanity! Separated from Spock, Kirk was forced to use his own intuition, to plead with that part of the madman which was still a proud fleet captain. He found occasional chinks in the shell of madness and he kept chipping away.

At last Spock was there. His calm support gave Kirk the strength he needed, the courage to try to reason with Garth's mad ravings. He tried to show how the Federation had changed from a group of warring worlds to the peace and friendship of the organization he now represented.

But finally his temper got the best of him. He could no longer communicate reasonably with someone who would not listen or attempt to understand. He spun in his chair, his eyes blazing as Garth mocked him. "I have risen above this decadent human weakness, which still has you in its command, by the way, Captain...Peace mission! Weaklings!"

He had to get Garth to see reason - to understand that people were no longer enemies, that it was no longer necessary to be a warrior, that he was essentially an explorer and a man of peace.

"...They had a dream, a dream that became a reality and spread throughout the stars. A dream that made Mr. Spock and me brothers." Instantly he held his breath. Had he gone too far? Had he read something into Spock that

wasn't really there?

Garth immediately jumped on Kirk's hesitation. He knew he had the human now. He hastily moved around the table and looked at the Vulcan. *Mr. Spock, do you consider Captain Kirk and yourself brothers?*

Kirk didn't dare look at Spock. How would the Vulcan deal with something he considered totally private?

But there was no hesitation. Spock's arms remained folded, his expression never changed. *"Captain Kirk speaks somewhat figuratively and with undue emotion..."*

Kirk glanced over at him. What came next would make or break the argument to sway Garth.

"...However, what he says is logical and I do, in fact, agree with it."

*#All italicized dialogue from *Whom Gods Destroy*, written by Lee Erwin.
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The Christmas Tree

As the door shut behind him he leaned back against it, not having the strength or the willpower to make it across the room to his bed. He couldn't remember ever having been so mentally and physically exhausted. Every bone in his body ached from fatigue, his mind was crying out for the oblivion of sleep - sleep that had been denied for too long.

It was only a week ago that he had been on Elba II - it seemed like years. His body still ached from the phaser stuns and his mind still cried out at the remembrance of the excruciating pain of a once-harmless rehabilitation chair, both suffered at Garth's hands - the man he had admired since his Academy days.

McCoy had certified Kirk as medically unfit for command, and Starfleet had deemed it necessary that he head the Federation delegation to the peace talks at Abidgneau. He had known how crucial the talks were. He knew that past attempts had bogged down due to the inability of the various races concerned to get along.

He was human. No other of his race was involved. He was an outsider. He was not a diplomat. James T. Kirk was possibly the only man who could guide such a complicated proceeding to a proper conclusion without having the whole thing blow up in his face.

His day did not start and stop as the conference did. He was on call twenty-four hours a day to soothe, cajole, joke, threaten, and occasionally exert the authority of his position to keep the talks going. As much as the other races did not agree, no matter how much they fought, they both admired and resented the man who kept them returning for more talks.

But now he was exhausted. He had reached his limit. Wearily he made his way across the room to the bed and collapsed face first into its softness.



Spock waited uneasily in front of the closed door. Twice he had rung the buzzer but there was no reply. He knew that Kirk had left the banquet planning to go directly to his room. He pushed the buzzer again but still there was no answer. Frowning, he activated the lock and stepped into the room. Kirk was lying flat out on the bed, still in his dress uniform.

Silently Spock approached the bed. The even rise and fall of Kirk's breathing told the Vulcan that he was deeply asleep. Carefully Spock rolled him over and sat down on the bed, propping Kirk up against him as he undid the uniform shirt. As he eased it off, Kirk muttered quietly and turned toward the Vulcan, burying his head in Spock's shoulder, his arms around his waist. Instinctively, Spock's arm went around the human's shoulder, protectively, lovingly, remembering as he did so McCoy's parting words.

"Take care of him, Spock. He's hurt and he's exhausted. Every man has a breaking point. Endurance has its limits, even for him."

How much does a man like this have to pay, Spock wondered, before he will be allowed to be like other men..

His thoughts were interrupted by the demanding summons of the intercom. He reached over and activated the audio, leaving the visual switched off.

Kirk stirred as the caller identified himself, surprised to find Spock's arm hugging him close and his own embrace. He let his hands drop but was grateful that Spock did not release his hold. It was the Andorian ambassador. There was more trouble and Kirk was urgently needed.

For a moment he slumped against Spock in defeat. He was too tired. He couldn't do the job he had been sent to do.

"Jim?"

He looked into the troubled brown eyes of the Vulcan - the eyes that were an open mirror of the inner feelings. A slight smile crossed his face. "I'm all right, Spock. I'm just so tired of egos and pointless bickering and seemingly unresolvable problems." He got up. "God, I'm so tired..." He stood with his head bowed for a moment, desperately trying to get control of a body and mind that no longer wanted to be controlled. Spock sat in helpless silence while Kirk dressed, then he was gone, to a place where only he could deal with the problem, where the Vulcan could do nothing to help.

The hours dragged past and still Kirk did not return. Spock grew increasingly restless as he waited. Kirk was like a tense coil, too tightly wound. He didn't dare let go - too much was at stake, too much counted on him. Yet he was going to explode unless something could get him to release all the fears and frustrations of the past days.

As Spock stood looking out the window, a sudden thought came to him. He remembered his youth, how his mother had made a big occasion out of a day that seemed to hold great significance to humans. He somehow doubted if Kirk remembered that it was Christmas Eve on Earth. Suddenly it became important to him that he have something for Kirk to come back to instead of just an empty, lonely room.



"You wish to purchase a tree?" The look on the man's face clearly showed that he thought Spock had taken leave of his senses.

"That is correct. I wish one that is living, preferably green and approximately two feet in height."

"Look, buddy, trees aren't exactly in my line..."

"But you can sell me one."

"Well, yeah, I guess so."

Spock received very odd looks as he made his way back to Federation Headquarters with the small tree under his arm, the roots wrapped in a wet cloth and various parcels full of decorations in his hands. But he paid no attention, his mind busy on his task.



Kirk sat alone in the conference room, his mind refusing to accept what had happened. The Andorians had stormed out despite his desperate efforts to stop them. He knew if he went personally to the ambassador he would be able to talk him into coming back, but he just didn't have the energy. The morning would do just as well.

His mind turned to Spock, to the incredible feeling of love and protection he had felt when he had awakened earlier cradled in the strength of the Vulcan's arms. Spock understood as no other man ever could what he was going through. He offered his love and concern and suddenly Kirk wanted to be with him. He gathered what little remaining strength he had and left for their rooms.



Spock was standing by the small tree when Kirk came in. The delicate lights twinkled on its branches, slender alien ornaments sparkled in the lights, tiny bells sounding as the heat from the lights caused them to gently collide with each other.

Kirk stood frozen in the doorway. For an instant, he was transported to a far away planet and another time. His eyes finally left the tree to rest on Spock, who silently stepped forward.

"Merry Christmas, Jim."

He knew he was crying. He could feel the tears running down his face and he couldn't stop them. Almost instantly Spock was there, strong arms surrounding him, hugging him close.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

He couldn't speak. He shook his head in futility. He held Spock tightly and rested his head on the Vulcan's shoulder until finally the tears stopped. Spock stood gently rocking Kirk in his encircling arms, talking soothingly. Finally Kirk managed to regain control and gently freed himself from Spock's arms, although he didn't let go of his hands.

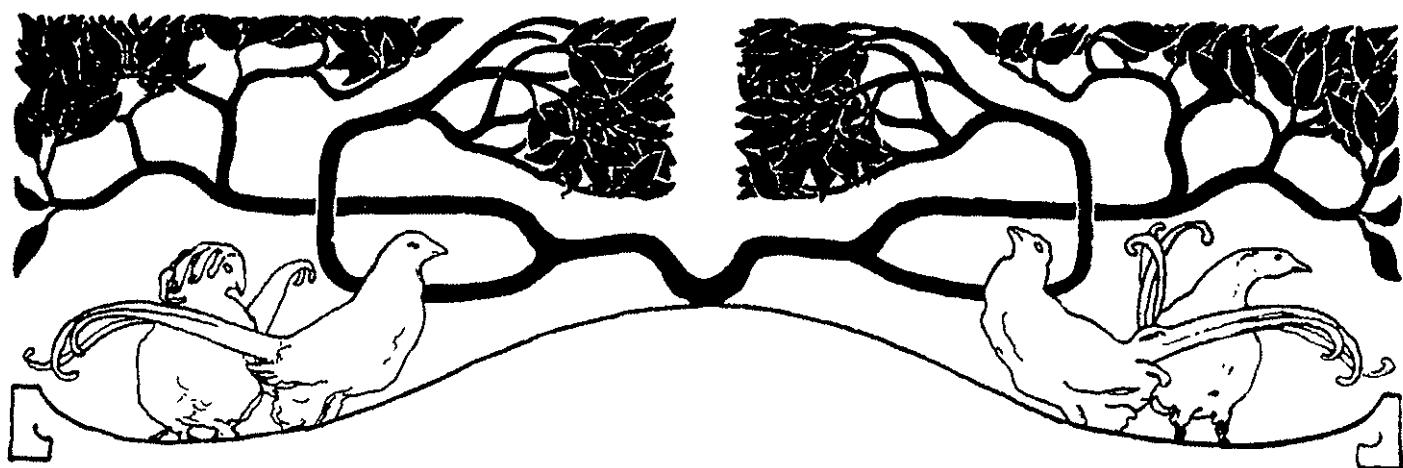
"Spock," he said, his voice choked with emotion. "All day I have been struggling with unreasonable, violent emotions. I thought mankind had sunk lower than I had thought it possible to sink and then, when I desperately needed you, my friend, you answered my unspoken cry like this..."

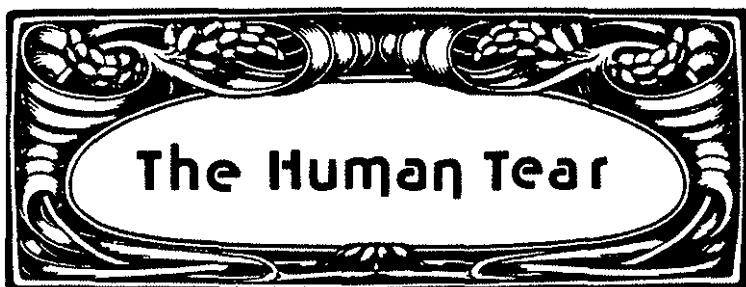
Spock's brown eyes were dangerously full as a tiny smile touched his face. "Your cry was not as silent as you think, Jim. And man has not sunk as low as you may believe. You, after all, still exist..."

A small smile touched Kirk's eyes. "As do you, my friend." His eyes turned to the tree. "And so does this - a living symbol of something that somehow seems to bring out the best in all of us."

They sat for a long time in silence, side by side, watching the twinkling lights. Finally Kirk fell asleep. Spock put an arm around his shoulder and pulled the human close. The soft, silky hair was mussed and had fallen forward over Kirk's face, the face as innocent as that new born baby of the legends.

"Sleep well, my friend," said Spock softly. "The tree and I shall always be here when you wake."





The dust swirled thickly through the air, choking any creature that dared to draw a breath. Few tried, for they were beyond the need. There was a faint stirring from one of the figures - the gold braid of command glinted in the small rays of sunlight as the dust slowly settled. The brown hair, normally easily stirred by the slightest breeze, was lying close to the skull, matted with dirt and caked with blood. The man made an effort to pull himself free from the rubble but the attempt was useless. The body was too badly damaged to obey the desperate command of the mind. Mercifully, the brain could stand no more and the body stilled.

Bolt after bolt of high energy rocked the giant ship. Systems were overloading, the power drain on the engines was reaching the critical stage. The Enterprise was dying, despite all efforts to protect her from the merciless onslaught.

"Take care of her, Spock," he had said. "We'll be back in a couple of hours. Routine business."

Routine, indeed. For Kirk, danger was routine, risk-taking a way of life. Spock had argued, vehemently, the admissibility of the Captain's beardown to the surface, but to no avail. As usual. Security, with the appropriate science personnel, should have completed the preliminary survey - sans Captain. The Science Officer was appropriate personnel...

Spock grimly hung onto the command chair. The computers had not been able to make sense of any of the data that had been fed into it. He had asked Chekov several times for information and each time the young ensign had not been able to comply. Finally, Spock rose and walked over to the computer station.

"Mr. Chekov, if you would take the time to analyze your data, I'm sure you would find the source of the energy bolts!"

The youthful face hardened under the harsh words of the Vulcan. Spock suddenly stopped, a familiar face appearing in his mind, the same accusing words being hurled.

"No speculation, no information, nothing! I've asked you three times for information on that thing and you've been unable to supply it. Insufficient data is not sufficient, Mr. Spock. You're the Science Officer, you're supposed to have sufficient data all the time!"

Spock remembered his defense against Kirk's words. "I'm well aware of that, Captain, but the computers contain nothing on this phenomenon and the new information is not yet significant."

Spock knew he had been hurt by Kirk's anger - and he knew he had hurt Chekov. Another bolt hit the Enterprise and he caught Chekov as he lost his balance. After regaining their feet, Spock turned away.

"Carry on, Ensign. Do the best you can with the information."

Chekov drew in a deep breath. "Aye, sir." ★

The dust had settled, covering everything with a thick layer of brown. The sun beat down on the desolate scene. The Science Centre was a shattered memory - only heaps of rubble lay where the sleek, modern complex had recently stood.

A harsh cough broke the stillness - lungs being torn apart. Long, ragged gasps sounded between the wrenching coughs. Gradually, the breathing was controlled and the coughing stilled. A hand slowly rose to wipe dirt off a bruised and bloody face. The movement seemed to exhaust any spare reserves of strength the man possessed, for the hand fell limply to the earth and was still. ★

"Mr. Sulu, do we have any more phaser power?"

"Negative, Mr. Spock. We've exhausted our reserves."

Spock studied the helmsman in silence. Sulu was too busy trying to hold the shuddering ship to do more than glance at the Vulcan behind him.

"Photon torpedoes?"

"Still operative, sir."

Spock looked over at Scotty who was staring at him in horror. "Mr. Spock, if we try to fire the torpedoes we'll surely overload the engines. We'll be helpless!"

"We'll be dead if we don't, Mr. Scott. We cannot hold out much longer against the power beams. I suggest you get down to engineering and see if there is any way to increase what little power we have left."

"Aye, sir," said Scotty dismally, but promptly left the bridge.

The communicator whistled. Spock momentarily hesitated - it was McCoy's voice.

"We have twenty-seven dead down here, Mr. Spock. Can't you do something to get us out of here?"

"We are trying, Doctor. I would suggest you apply yourself to running the Sickbay. I am sure there is more than enough work for you there."

The communications from Sickbay were abruptly cut off. Spock sat looking at the console on the chair arm. He thought of another time this had happened - and then, as now, Jim Kirk was not aboard - he was lost in the interspace of the Tholian sector. McCoy had disapproved then, as he did now, of the tactics that the Vulcan had used - risking the ship for one man.

"Are you satisfied? Spock, why did you do it?"

"The decision to fight was logical. Lack of time prevented any other course of action. The Tholian ship had to be disabled."

"You should have known what could have happened - and done everything in your power to safeguard your crew. That's the mark of a starship captain - like Jim!"

'Like Jim.' Like the man he could never become - the commander he would like to be. A shuddering blast shook the bridge, bringing Spock back to the present.



Reality was also returning to the survivor on the devastated planet below. Pain-filled hazel eyes opened to the stark truth of his situation. He called out, hoping against hope that there was someone else left alive. His voice echoed hollowly back in his ears. He lifted himself onto his elbows, fighting the rising nausea caused by the movement. Fighting it - and failing. Retching violently, he refused to stop struggling to get free. Then, exhausted, he lay still, his body still shaking with dry heaves, the blood from the reopened scalp wound trickling down into his eyes. He was too tired to care, too tired to wipe it away. He watched with disinterest as it gathered in a small pool beside his head, then sank into the thirsty ground.



"Spock to Engineering. Mr. Scott, I'll need full power in about two minutes."

"Mr. Spock, the engines won't stand it! They're already well into the danger zone as it is."

"Nevertheless, I need full power, Mr. Scott."

The Vulcan heard the undisguised bitterness in the chief engineer's voice as he answered. "All right, Mr. Spock, you'll have it."

Spock looked up at Sulu. "Maximum spread on torpedoes, Mr. Sulu. Fire when ready."

The torpedoes sped on their way, their brilliant flashes on detonation filling the screen. The bridge crew sat, no one saying a word. There was no answering bolt of energy - no movement of any kind.

"Whatever it was, Mr. Spock, it looks like we got it," said Sulu.

Scotty arrived just as Sulu finished speaking, his face grim and his eyes fixed accusingly at Spock.

"It's just as well the attack was broken, Mr. Spock - we're helpless. Warp drive is out - the impulse engines are only operating at quarter efficiency. We'd be dead ducks for anyone now."

"I doubt if we would be confused with deceased aquatic fowl, Mr. Scott. Lt. Uhura, try to contact the landing party."

As she tried, Spock was aware of Scotty's eyes still throwing daggers at him. This wasn't the first time his orders had caused massive damage to Scotty's engines. And, as before, it was done in an indirect effort to rescue the Captain.

Spock could still see the huge asteroid, the phaser beams pinpointed on it in a desperate attempt to divert it from the helpless planet. And he could still hear Scotty's angry words when they had failed:

"And don't ask for any more warp 9, Mr. Spock. Our star drive is completely burned out. The only thing we

have left is impulse power."

Uhura's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Mr. Spock, I don't seem to be able to contact the Captain or the landing party."

McCoy heard her as the turbo-lift doors opened. Icy blue eyes locked with unfathomable brown ones.

"Well, Spock," said McCoy under his breath, moving down to the command chair. "Was it worth it?"

Spock did not take his eyes from McCoy's face. "Keep trying, Lieutenant."



The communicator beeped again. Kirk fluently cursed the heavy debris which pinned his legs. He could almost reach the communicator - straining to the limit he could just touch it with his fingertips. Sharp pain stabbed through his back as he struggled, but he ignored it. Then the communicator fell silent. He stared at it numbly, then felt hot tears stinging his eyes. He was alone - he was alive - and he couldn't let them know. Momentary panic gripped him, then he forced himself to think clearly. The Enterprise was there - a rescue party would be down to get him. He only had to hold on until they got there.



But a landing party would not be going down - not immediately. A grim group was gathered in the transporter room.

"It's no good, Mr. Spock. The circuits are completely burned out."

"The shuttlecraft..."

"The bay doors were damaged by the energy bolts, sir. They won't operate."

"Get a repair team on the transporter, Mr. Scott. We've got to get down to the planet as soon as possible." Spock contacted the bridge on the wall communicator. "Lt. Uhura, relay our position to Starfleet along with the assessment of damages." The small group broke up.

Arriving on the bridge, Spock went over to Chekov. "Have you run a sensor sweep of the surface, Ensign?"

"I've tried to, sir, but I don't think the sensors are working properly. I can't make any sense of the readings."

Spock brushed him aside and checked the system. Chekov was right - the information was not accurate. Spock attempted to adjust the circuits but had no success. Unaware of Chekov's gaze, he clenched his fists, knuckles growing white under the pressure. Kirk needed help - he wouldn't let himself believe that the captain was dead, but as on Tantalus V, Scalos, Gideon, he couldn't communicate, couldn't send word that he was alive. Spock had to find a way to get to him. He knew those hazel eyes would show no surprise when he turned up, just as they had shown no surprise those other times, had just accepted the fact of his presence. And he knew that Kirk was holding on now, waiting for him.



Reality was slipping. Kirk felt himself floating, the pain gradually lessening. He was slowly sinking into final oblivion.

"No!" he said savagely. He jerked himself up on his elbows. The searing pain quickly replaced the feathery clouds in his mind. He lay panting for a few minutes, welcoming the pain almost as a friend.

He looked at the communicator laying so innocently just out of his reach. There had to be a way of getting to it and reaching the ship - and Spock. He tried to move his legs - he could only feel one of them. He pushed as hard as he could, his back screaming with pain. Sweat ran into his eyes, joining the crusted blood, but still he pushed. The communicator became blurred in a red haze but still he struggled. Then his fingers touched - he pushed harder. Finally his fingers closed on a corner and he pulled the communicator toward him, tears of pain and relief mingling with the sweat and blood.

Fumbling fingers pulled up the grid and a welcoming sound emitted from the device. He heard a gasping voice rasp out - surely not his own!

"Enterprise...Spock..."

Then - blackness.



8

The technicians confirmed what Spock already knew. The sensors would not work properly until they were entirely overhauled - a major repair job. Damage control parties were reporting in from all over the ship. Most areas were in operational readiness. They now had impulse power, the transporter might be ready in a couple of hours.

Starfleet had answered. The Enterprise had encountered a runaway solar beam transfer unit that had been designed for the huge farming colony of Tynat IV. It was constructed to intensify their weak sun's rays for their vast expanse of crops, but it had been sent out of orbit by an asteroid shower and had lodged in orbit around

Signia VII - and the powerful star of that system had turned the unit into a killer.

Spock was in the turbo-lift, heading for the bridge, a tight control clamped on his emotions. He had just left McCoy; they had run into each other accidentally and Spock knew he had been close to killing the human. He should be used to McCoy's irrational behaviour by now, but the Doctor always picked the most awkward times to shove his psychology at him.

The turbo-lift doors vanished, iron bars took their place - McCoy had just grasped his arm.

"Do you know why you're not afraid of dying, Spock? You're more afraid of living. Every day you stay alive is one more day you might slip - and let your human half peek out. That's it, isn't it? Why, you wouldn't know what to do with a genuine warm, decent feeling."

It had hurt then and it still hurt. Why wouldn't McCoy leave him alone? He coped with his conflicting natures in the best way he knew how. Jim understood, and never tried to make him over into his own likeness. Kirk's face swam into his vision, his expression always the same - the mischievous smile which always came before the gentle teasing.

Spock closed his eyes as he felt the turbo-lift start to slow, clearing his mind of the unwanted intrusions. As he opened them, the doors parted and the bridge appeared in his vision. He stepped out just as a crackling signal came over the communications console. He was closer than Uhura. His long, slender fingers pressed down.

"Enterprise, Spock here."

A harsh, ragged voice came gasping from the planet surface.

"Enterprise...Spock..."

That was all. Despite their frantic efforts to re-establish contact, they were unsuccessful.



The transporter room had the coordinates. Spock was ready to go.

"It's suicide, Mr. Spock," protested Scotty loudly. "There's no telling if this thing will work. You might be scattered in small pieces all over the planet!"

"Just make sure it doesn't happen, Scotty," said a familiar voice. McCoy had arrived during Scotty's tirade, medical kit slung over his shoulder.

"A shaky transporter is nothing to gamble with, Doctor," said Scotty, starting to back off from the double onslaught.

McCoy grinned. "I have no faith in one that is working properly - I've as little faith in it now." Seeing Spock's rising eyebrow, he continued, "Word spreads fast, Mr. Spock. You'll probably need a doctor down there."

Spock nodded slowly. He would never understand this man. A few minutes ago they couldn't say a civil word to each other, but once again Kirk's need drew them together.

They had faced each other in this situation before.

"I shall beam down, Doctor. If I'm unable to communicate, a landing party may be necessary."

"Well, Mr. Spock, if you're going into the lion's den, you'll need a medical officer."

Spock watched McCoy as he joined him on the transporter platform.

"Well, Spock?"

His words from the other time echoed in his mind.

"Daniel, as I recall, had only his faith, but I welcome your company, Doctor."

Brown eyes met blue ones, all hostility gone from both. He looked over at Scotty.

"Energize."

Scotty shook his head glumly but moved the levers.

The process took an agonizingly long time but they finally materialized in one piece. Spock contacted the ship and informed Scotty of the technical problems which still needed correcting while McCoy scanned the area with his tricorder. Readings showed several life forms.

They ran.



McCoy had gone. There were others to be attended. He said he didn't need help. Spock was sitting beside the unconscious form of his Captain, the pale, bloody head resting in his lap. It had not taken them long to find him - had taken even less time for Spock to move the heavy debris that had buried Kirk's lower body. McCoy had run a quick scan, his face exactly matching the Vulcan's - his professional manner not betraying any feeling. Some shots, another scan - then he and Spock gently rolled Kirk over. The muscular form was as limp as a rag. McCoy worked quickly, sealing off what was, by this time, very sluggish bleeding, but from the appearance of the surrounding ground it had once been heavy. No words passed between them.

Then McCoy stood, wiping sweat and what looked like a tear from his face. He looked at Spock.

"We were in time."



Those words echoed over and over in Spock's brain. He lifted his hand and wiped some of the dirt and blood off Kirk's face. This reckless, impulsive human - what would have happened if he had died? Spock felt his carefully built up barriers crumbling. A hot tear fell and splashed on the bloody cheek.

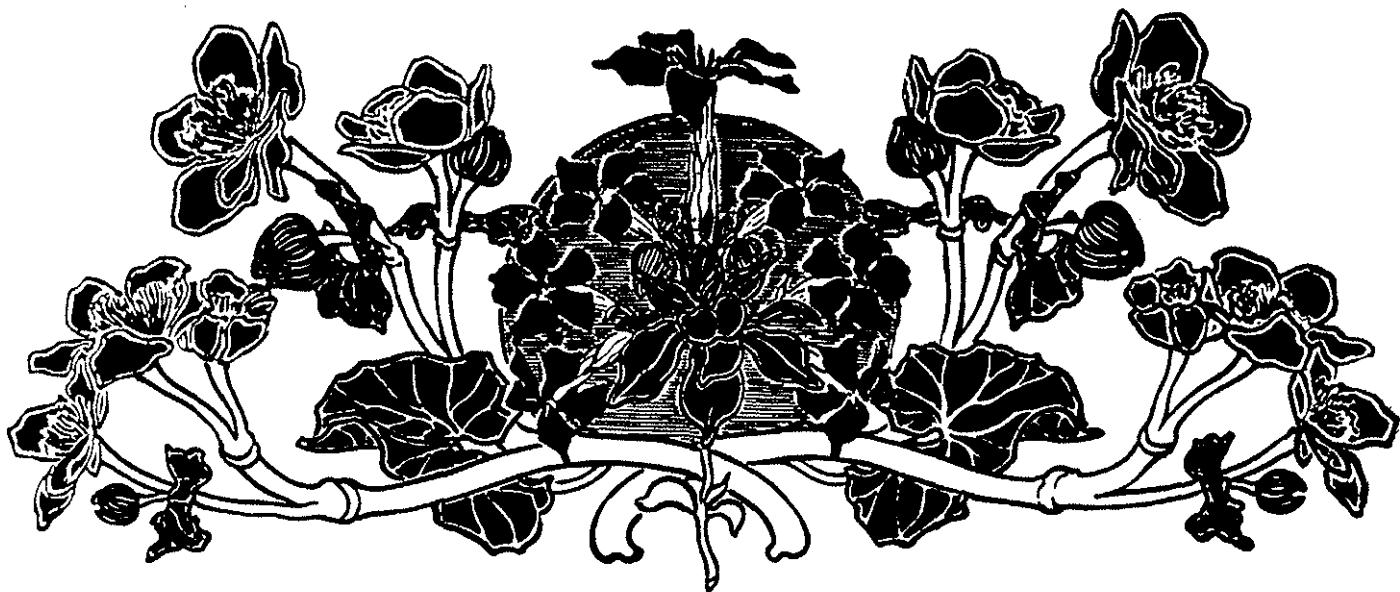
He roughly dragged his hand across his eyes, furious at his lack of control, even with no one to see it but himself.

A hand touched his face, fingers tracing the path the tear had taken. Hazel eyes, filled with pain but softened by a much greater emotion were looking at him. Spock took that hand, a smile trembling at the corners of his lips, his brown eyes great liquid pools.

"You'll be all right, Jim. McCoy's here."

Kirk lightly squeezed his hand. He had heard Spock's words - not the ones he had said but the words that rang out between them:

"Everything's all right - we're together."



The Outsider

It began many months ago. No, not really that long ago; it just seems a lifetime to me. It happened during my last week as a cadet at the Academy. It was then that I first saw him.

He was being led down the hall in laughing protest, complaining that he was no longer an instructor at the Academy but a mighty starship captain and it was beneath his dignity to talk to cadets. He was quickly overruled and gave in, obviously pleased at being asked, despite his putting up a fuss.

They say a man instinctively knows how to recognize another man's strength - he innately realizes the power and danger that goes with it, and the inborn ability to command which only a few possess.

I felt that man's strength hit like a jolt, as though an electric charge had passed from him to me. I found myself frozen to the spot, helpless to deal with something I had heard of but never experienced before this moment.

He glanced briefly in my direction but there was no sign that my presence had registered in any way. My own state of mind was too confused to allow any acknowledgement of that look.

"You're late for lecture, Mister!" The heavy hand of my class supervisor landed on my shoulder causing me to jump. Flaming red, I glanced in the Captain's direction and saw amused sympathy shining out of his eyes.

"Come on, Alex, give the poor kid a break." The voice matched the eyes, the smile almost instantly breaking the command image, making him seem like a co-conspirator in my trouble.

"The service requires discipline, Jim," were the words that rang in my ears as I was marched off down the hall.

I saw him later that day with several hundred others. Every word he said is still clear in my mind. I knew he had nothing prepared, and he had no notes in front of him. He held us all spellbound as he talked about life in Starfleet, the responsibilities of representing the Federation throughout the galaxy.

It was over far too quickly, and he was gone. James T. Kirk had touched my life for a brief moment and had left an impact that I had never felt before.

And I admit I was disturbed. I was not the type of person to fall under the spell of everyone I met. I had never had crushes, no special teachers; if anything, I turned cynically in the other direction. Yet for weeks I could not get this man out of my mind. I found myself asking anyone who might know anything about him for any sort of information - what he was like, his background, his current assignment, anything! It got to the point where my roommate began to wonder about me, so I stopped. But my interest in the man did not fade.

I saw James Kirk once shortly after graduation. We were on a training mission and had stopped for a few days at Starbase 11. My friend Derek and I were on shore leave. We were wandering around the base when I saw him coming out of the hospital complex. He looked strained and tired. He stopped, seeming at a loss as to where to go, but then the doors behind him opened and a Vulcan stepped through. We had come quite close by then and easily overheard their exchange.

"McCoy says he's out of danger, Spock. I'm contacting the Terran Embassy; Sam's son should be brought up at home."

I watched those dark alien eyes look at Kirk and felt a momentary flash of anger at the unfeeling features. Kirk had obviously been through a lot and looked like he deserved some sympathetic attention. Who was this Vulcan?

I was aware of Derek at my elbow. "Hey, what's the matter with you? Come on, we're going to be late for the beam-up and Rogers will be on our backs again!" I had not realized that I had stopped and was staring at the two men. Nor was Kirk aware of it - he seemed lost in some private grief. But the Vulcan knew. His eyes had shifted from Kirk to me and I knew that I had somehow been registered into that brain, that my image would never be forgotten. I felt threatened by the thought.

My training days ended. I was now a full-fledged ensign ready to start at the bottom of the heap. Unlike many of my classmates, I was immediately assigned to a starship and I dreaded the assignment. The ship was the *USS Enterprise*. Her Captain was James Kirk and his First Officer was the Vulcan, Spock.

It had been some time since my encounter with the captain and Mr. Spock on Starbase 11, but the sight of the Vulcan's unfathomable expression as I watched Kirk was seared into my memory. I felt that the alien knew about the powerful hold that Kirk had on me, and I was uncomfortable with the idea that somehow he understood why - and I didn't.

I was determined to be good at my work. If I was going to be on board Kirk's ship he was never going to have any reason to question my ability. I was assigned as an assistant in medical services and my superior was a Dr. Leonard McCoy. From our first meeting I liked him. He was gruff but friendly enough and seemed to be the most unmilitary man I had ever met. He was also a stern taskmaster and I quickly learned to be on my toes. But he always seemed pleased with my work and, sneaking a peek at my records, I discovered that he had put in a recommendation for an early promotion.

For several months life went on with no complications. Then Rigellian fever struck the ship and we did not have nearly enough antitoxin to combat it.

I had been on my feet for two days trying to prepare a synthetic substitute for ryetalyn when McCoy came into the lab accompanied by the Vulcan. I tried very hard to be inconspicuous.

But the body grows careless when denied sleep, and the culture I was working on dropped from my hand with a loud clatter. As I bent to retrieve it, I dislodged a large jar which spattered its contents all over the floor. I was inconspicuous no longer.

The Vulcan's eyes were on me - I saw a momentary look of recollection, then the dark depths were fathomless. McCoy, looking almost as tired as I felt, simply told me to clean up the mess and then get to bed. There was no use trying to work in my condition.

I slept the sleep of the dead. Several days later the epidemic had been halted and we were on our way to our next assignment.

Making my way to the lab I passed McCoy. He did not appear to notice me and was muttering something that sounded like, "damned Vulcan". I stared after him but he didn't slow down and soon disappeared around a bend in the corridor.

I decided to take a short cut down the ladder, so got off the turbolift at Deck 5. As I passed the Captain's quarters the door opened and the Vulcan came out. I caught a glimpse of a gold-clad figure collapsed at the desk. Then the door slid shut and I was face to face with a cold glare. I had seen something I was not meant to see. I met Spock's look and found myself hating him. I felt that whatever had happened must have been his fault, otherwise why would McCoy have been damning him, and why was Kirk in the condition he was? For all his strength, Kirk carried an air of vulnerability that cried out for someone who understood, and that was something that Spock could never give him. But I could, I knew I could, given the chance. I dared the Vulcan then. I met his stare head on and I know that he saw my threat.

You have no claim on him, Vulcan! my mind screamed. Your race denies emotion. You couldn't possibly understand him, know his feelings, his needs.

They said that Spock possessed telepathic powers. He may not have been able to read my mind that day, but I am sure my expression conveyed my thoughts. A funny look flickered across his face but was gone before I had a chance to wonder what it meant. Then he, too, was gone.

From that moment on I decided to become indispensable, my youth not permitting me to realize that no one can attain that impossible height. Previously I had avoided landing parties, shying away from any contact with Kirk unless it could not be helped. I was honestly scared by my feelings. Each time I was in his presence I felt as though I was drawn by a magnet. I also saw that it was not noticed.

Kirk was indeed an extraordinary man. There were 430 people aboard his ship and he could call each person by name. Most of them could also be labeled by occupation and what section of the ship they worked in. He had the ability to make everyone under his command feel special. He did not minimize the importance of anyone's contribution, no matter how large or small. I also discovered that he put no man ahead of any other - except for the Vulcan.

Spock was special to him and he stated it by not being obvious about it. But as I grew more familiar with him, as our increased contact on landing parties and briefings made me more aware of the man and his habits, I learned to recognize the signs - the looks, the gestures, each question, each decision arrived at after an almost hidden exchange with the Vulcan. And I burned. Spock had something I wanted badly. It made me try all the harder.

I thought my motive was unnoticed, my feelings well-controlled. I had not reckoned with the keen observation

of my superior.

I was working late, finishing the reports on the materials we had gathered on Salundia. The biological surveys had shown promising reports of a potentially new supply of Yagun, a vital drug in the treatment of Bisyndencephalitis, an increasingly common disease of the central nervous system and deadly if not treated in time. I vaguely heard the lab doors open but didn't pay any attention. The resulting silence finally caused me to look up.

McCoy was leaning against a lab table, his keen blue eyes boring into me. As I lifted my head his expression changed, but I knew that he didn't like what he saw.

"Y'all are puttin' in a heap of overtime, Ensign," he drawled in a voice I had already learned meant he was covering up strong emotions under the calm exterior. "Maybe you should consider private enterprise - a man can get pretty rich that way."

I mumbled something vague and bent back over my work.

He was silent, but I was uncomfortably aware of his presence. Finally I could stand it no longer. "Do you have something to say, Doctor?" My voice sounded angry even to my ears. "If not, I have work to do...sir!"

He looked a bit surprised, then shifted his weight onto his feet and walked over to where I was working.

"Yes, I do want to say something." His eyes were hard and I instantly knew what he was going to say. "Your animosity toward Spock is starting to interfere with the harmony and efficiency of the research personnel assigned to landing parties. You haven't said a civil word to him in two weeks..."

I could feel my face redden but I knew better than to interrupt.

"I don't know what's going on between the two of you but it can't continue. You're one of the best men I've ever had working under me and I don't want to lose you, but this attitude's got to stop..."

"Has Spock complained about me?" I interrupted. "Has he complained about me or about my work? Has the Cap... Captain..." I stumbled over the word and saw his eyes change as a new thought seemed to enter his mind. I grew more ill at ease under his scrutiny. He was starting to put two and two together and I could see he wasn't happy with what they were adding up to. The silence began to stretch out into an uncomfortable length. Finally he spoke.

"You're treading on dangerous ground, Ensign, and in a place you don't and can't ever belong. Try to understand the world those two men inhabit, then take a look at yourself. Do it for your own sake!"

Then he was gone and I was left staring at a closed door.

After that I was more aware of both Spock and McCoy. Every action I made seemed to underline my growing obsession with Kirk. But if he was aware of it he gave no sign. I tried to be civil to Spock and must have succeeded for McCoy did not speak to me about it again.

And to my pleasure, Kirk seemed to be starting to rely on my presence. He began to turn to me for information as we carried out our assignments, and occasionally I would look over in triumph at the Vulcan but I never got the satisfaction of seeing him anything but expressionless.

I thought it might go on like this forever, but a showdown was inevitable. And it came sooner than I expected.

Jancinta was a small planet in a far corner of the quadrant we were patrolling. We were heading there to complete the data started by previous survey expeditions, and to see what progress had been made in the development of the Jancintan culture and civilization. A small party beamed down in native costume - the Captain, Mr. Spock, anthropologist Marstan, and me. Our destination was a small village a short distance from our beaming point.

We were welcomed by the villagers and made to feel at home. I found myself admitting to a grudging respect for Spock; Kirk was a perfect diplomat and Spock the perfect foil, probing where it would be impossible for Kirk to try. If any toes were stepped on it would be done by him, leaving Kirk free of stain.

When we turned in for the night, I could tell that Kirk was pleased with what we had found. We would do some more exploring the next day, then beam back up to the ship. Sleep came quickly to all of us except Spock, who, as usual, sat meditating. For all I knew he never slept.

We had been asleep for a couple of hours when a sudden alarm from Spock had us on our feet. Raiders from a neighboring village had planned their attack well, and we would have died where we slept if Spock had not been awake.

We were vastly outnumbered. Marstan was killed almost immediately. The Captain was managing to hold his own, I disposed of my nearest assailant and saw Spock slowly staggering forward under the weight of his attackers. I started for him, foolishly letting my attention stray for a moment to Kirk, and only too late saw the flash of the blade. I moved as quickly as I could but too late to entirely miss the knife's thrust. I fell to the floor, unable to move.

Kirk saw Spock's helplessness almost at the same moment I did. With a tremendous effort he freed himself from his attackers and hurled himself into the middle of the large group holding Spock. I watched, helpless, as they were both beaten senseless. Then darkness claimed me.

"What will they do to our friend?" The face and voice showed no expression, the dark eyes masking any show of feeling.

"It is best not to ask such things," said the village leader. "You will not see him again."

I held my peace as Spock helped me back to the hut, but when he started to contact the ship, I exploded. "What about the Captain, Mr. Spock? He's in trouble - he could already be dead! Are we just going to leave him? Is that all he means to you?"

His eyes met mine over the communicator. "My feelings are not open for discussion, Ensign. Your duty is to obey orders, nothing more." I stood fuming while he talked to Mr. Scott, then I found myself on the ship's transporter platform - alone. McCoy was there with a medical team. He took one look at me.

"Sickbay, Mister. Right now!"

"But the Captain..."

"Now!"

The voice was to be obeyed, and I did.

So I was there when Kirk was brought in. Spock was with him. No one paid any attention to me lying in the corner. They were both bloody, and from where I was I could not tell how badly Kirk was hurt. They disappeared into another room and the silence echoed around my small corner. Eventually Christine Chapel came out.

"How's...?"

"He'll be all right," she said, a smile of relief on her face, "but it will take a while. Apparently he was being used as a sacrifice to appease their gods. Fortunately Mr. Spock arrived before they got very far..." She broke off as McCoy came through the doorway and moved over to me.

"I see Christine is giving out the gory details," he said with a smile. "How are you feeling?" he continued, switching the panel over my bed. He frowned slightly as he watched the arrows settle, then smiled again as he looked down at me. "Nothing a little more blood won't fix up." He turned to Christine and ordered another unit of whole blood. He watched her move away, then turned back to me. "You all right?"

I knew he didn't mean my wound, and I didn't know how to answer.

He looked at me a moment longer, then said in quiet anger, "Don't you ever give up?" and walked away before I had a chance to answer.

I was out of Sickbay before Kirk. While I was there my jealousy of Spock grew as I saw how much time he spent with Kirk, and how much his presence meant to the Captain. McCoy was aware of my feeling but left me to argue with myself. He released me after a few days with a final word of warning.

So life went on as before - I watched Kirk and avoided Spock where I could. McCoy watched me but I gave him no further cause for concern.

The weeks passed. Kirk recovered and took command back from the Vulcan. He commended me for my actions on Jancinta and I flushed, partly out of embarrassment and pride, partly from shame, since Spock had obviously not told him of my behavior after Kirk's capture. I wondered at this, but Spock gave no hint as to why he had omitted it.

This made me curious and I started to watch Kirk and Spock more closely in those quiet times they spent together. Not as I had before when I was trying to plot ways of getting myself between them, but to see what it was that McCoy meant when he said there was no room for me there.

The days passed and I watched, not really understanding what it was I was looking for. What was beginning to register was that although I deliberately tried to be rude to the Vulcan, there was no retaliation from Spock. No matter how great the snub I managed to impart he did not answer it, nor was my behavior reported. Occasionally I would see a brief look almost akin to sorrow in the dark eyes, then nothing. What was it that the Vulcan knew about me that I didn't know myself? I started to do some serious thinking.

We were charting new areas of space and the dangers of the unexplored regions were many. The scientific teams were spread out all over the ship doing experimental work necessary to analyze the sensor readings that were being fed into the computers.

I was working in one of the pods. Spock was assisting the experiment at his own request and, although I disliked him, I found him to be remarkably efficient. He always seemed to anticipate my next move.

What happened will always remain hazy in my mind. I remember the shrieking alarm of red alert and the words, "ion storm". I heard the Captain's voice, calm but urgent, come over the intercom. Then the world exploded. I felt strong arms surround me and my body hurled into waiting hands. I must have blacked out for a few minutes because I woke to find myself lying on my back with M'Benga hovering over me. Then someone was gently laid down beside me and I heard McCoy's voice.

"M'Benga, over here!" I knew it was Spock who was lying there so deathly still. I pushed myself up on one elbow and was immediately conscious of two things - the driven flow of green blood running from the Vulcan's temple,

and the anguished look on Kirk's face as he knelt over him. I will never forget that look. It mirrored the brief glimpses of sorrow I had seen in Spock's eyes. I think that was the first time I really let myself begin to understand what they must share. I was being lifted onto a stretcher. Kirk stood up and came over.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

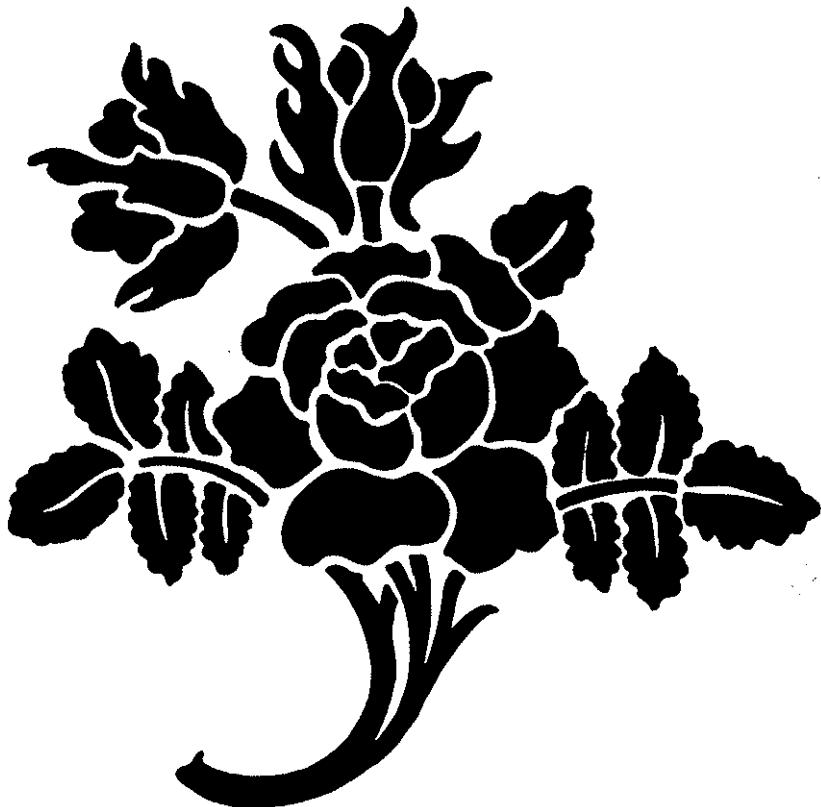
I nodded. "Thanks to Spock, or I would be dead for sure. He didn't have to stay. He could have made it out - he was outside the pod..." As I spoke his eyes grew bright and he nodded.

"That's Spock," he said simply. "It always has been."

I had the entire night to think about those words. Spock was in surgery for a long time. McCoy assisted M'Benga and the Captain paced in and out. I lay silent, unnoticed, as the larger drama unfolded. Etched forever in my mind is the image of Kirk as McCoy told him that Spock would live. The tense muscles gave and he sank down into a chair, his head bowed. McCoy's hand on Kirk's shoulder told me all I needed to know about his understanding of that unique friendship. I now understood his warning. He had not meant to hurt me, he had meant to protect me from hurt. Despite the possible grief that always hung like a dark shadow over those two men, they dared to open themselves to the dangers that came with such a friendship.

I transferred from the Enterprise shortly after that. I had finally begun to grow up. I went with a good record, high recommendations, and total silence from the one man who could have destroyed it all by reporting my insubordinate behavior.

And I left as much an outsider as I had been when I arrived. But I had seen something that few men are ever privileged to witness, and I was now free to seek it for myself.



SAFE HAVEN

The man standing at the end of the long table looked uncomfortable. His commander's dark eyes had been boring into him for the past several minutes and the tension was building. Finally he spoke. "He gave you no information? No reason at all for being here?"

"Only that he was on leave and he fully intended to do nothing but sleep in the sun."

The man seated at the head of the table frowned. "One of Starfleet's most illustrious officers does not come to an out of the way planet like Laun only to sleep. He must know something, or at least suspect we are here." He tapped his fingers on the table in front of him, trying to see the problem from all possible directions. The others waited in respectful silence. Finally he looked up. "Jarret, stay close to him. Let us know his every move. Be ready for elimination."



Jarret swallowed with some difficulty. He had not been with the Brondi long, but he had grown up with the stories of the Brondi and their impossible assassinations. No one had ever come close to capturing a member of the group and no outsider knew who they were or where they came from - they knew only their name. He had passed their stringent initiation with high marks and, unknown to him, the commander had marked him as a special agent, one who could be trusted to obey the most dangerous orders, and survive. This would be the first big test of his ability. Jarret was going to handle it by himself. From what he had heard about the man he was being sent to watch, Jarret would need every bit of his skill.



The object of the Brondis' concern was just awakening. He was taking his time, deliberately holding the reality of the daylight at arm's length. On the *Enterprise* he could not allow himself the luxury of laziness; he was enjoying it to the fullest. Finally, reluctantly, he opened his eyes. Glancing at the room's chronometer, he saw he had slept a solid twelve hours. A fleeting smile crossed his lips. It had been months since he'd last managed that - too many things had been happening recently to allow it. He was usually lucky to get half that amount. Lazily he rolled over. Now he had an entire week to sleep, seven days before the *Enterprise* would be back to pick him up.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror across the room and was thankful that he didn't look as haggard as he had the night before. He silently thanked Spock for suggesting that he leave the *Enterprise* and spend a few days on Laun. His first officer would take the supplies to Alta VI and pick Kirk up on the way back.



Laun was a small planet, a bit off the normal travel lanes and, because of that fact, did not have a very large population. But it was beautiful; there were many lakes and woods, and the planet had almost ideal weather. Since they were passing very near to it on their course to Alta VI, it had been no trouble to divert and drop Kirk off.

McCoy had felt very smug as he watched the captain disappear in the sparkle of the transporter. He had been prepared to order medical rest leave had Kirk put up an argument, but for once he had not even murmured a protest.

It had been a conspiracy between McCoy and Spock. Kirk had been exhausted. The senior officers had been given rest leave after their ordeal on Platonius - all but Kirk. He had been appointed to the peace delegation sent to Wantu - over McCoy's protests. And the *Enterprise* had received her new orders as soon as he had returned from the long weeks of tedious, delicate negotiations.

Together Spock and McCoy had maneuvered Kirk into the Sickbay. Kirk had arrived for a drink, been treated to a physical and the results handed to him. As he sat there silently looking at the report, Spock had suggested a vacation on Laun. Kirk had agreed and as soon as he had signalled his safe arrival at his destination, the *Enterprise*

had continued on her way.



The small lodge where Kirk was staying was almost empty. Not exactly the tourist season at a highly popular resort, he thought as he entered the dining room. The room was large, its huge windows allowing sunlight to fill the area. Just inside the door sat an elderly couple at a small table; they smiled pleasantly at him as they exchanged greetings. The only other occupants were a group of children, accompanied by two adults, in the far corner. His eyes took them in, unconsciously appreciating one of the women. He settled himself by the window and ordered a large breakfast. As he ate, he despaired over the food processors on the ship. There was no way synthetic food could come close to comparing to the real thing.

His eyes wandered back to the children. They were remarkable quiet. He smiled to himself. Probably just obedient, he thought. I'm too used to Peter and his wild antics. He became absorbed in his meal and the scenery and forgot about the others.

He was still eating when the children and their escorts left. Kirk heard a sound beside his table and glanced up. One small boy had stopped in front of him and he found himself staring into the largest, darkest eyes he had ever seen. With a start he found the eyes strangely familiar. The yearning look, half-concealed in the depths of those eyes, was the same one that he often caught in Spock's in those moments when the Vulcan thought he was not being observed. He smiled gently at the child but the expression didn't change; the dark eyes seemed to peer into his very soul.

"Tad, don't bother the gentleman."

Kirk was absorbed in looking at the boy and hadn't heard anyone approach. Looking up, he was suddenly conscious of blonde hair, bronzed skin, and amused blue eyes. He stared at her for a moment. Seeing her close up, she looked vaguely familiar although he was sure he had never met her before. Realizing that he was staring, he flushed slightly and rose to his feet.

"He's not bothering me at all. It's been a long time since I've had a face to face objective appraisal from anyone less than a Fleet Admiral."

She laughed and he immediately decided he liked her very much. The timbre of her laugh suited the slight whisper that went with her voice. He smiled, and looked down at the boy. "Well, it seems we'll have to say goodbye." There was no response from the boy. Kirk looked up, his eyebrows lifted in an unspoken question. The girl's face sobered slightly, but she was still smiling when she spoke.

"Tad's one of our special people, and very precious to all of us." As she spoke, she put a protective arm around the small shoulders. Kirk was aware that she did not want to go further with her explanation with the boy standing there.

"That must be a very honored position. It was nice to meet you, Tad." He remained standing as the girl and small boy walked out hand in hand, Tad still not taking his eyes from Kirk until they had disappeared outside.

Their exchange did not go unnoticed. Jarret had been watching them. Seeing that Kirk was finished with his meal, Jarret slipped back to his position behind the manager's desk. He was working there quietly when Kirk strolled out of the dining room.

"Good morning, Captain. I trust you slept well."

Kirk smiled. "You weren't joking when you said it was the best room in the house. I haven't slept that well in months."

"I'm pleased to hear that, sir. Is there anything I can do to help you plan your day?"

"No. I think I'm just going to poke around. I saw from a map in my room that there are plenty of hiking trails. I think I'll just take a long walk."

"A splendid idea, sir. The woods are especially lovely this time of year."

Kirk left the lodge. As he walked down the path a faint frown crossed his face. Something's strange here, he thought to himself. That man's attitude is all wrong. He's a big, sinewy person, obviously a product of intense physical training. What's he doing behind a desk? He certainly doesn't belong there. And his speech seems unnatural - forced - as if he were putting on an act. But why? He shrugged. He was being too suspicious. It was obvious that he'd been too long without leave if hotel managers were getting to him! Still, he'd always found that his instincts should be listened to; his uncanny sixth sense had often saved him, that sense that he explained away as a 'hunch'. He would keep that man's name in his mind and when he got back to the Enterprise, he would look him up in the computer banks. His name is Jarrod? No, that isn't right. It started with a 'J'. Ah, yes, Jarret; that's it, Mr. Jarret.

He turned and looked back at the lodge. It was nestled in a pine wood; the dappled sunlight accented the cosy setting and subdued architecture. The elderly couple he had met at breakfast were strolling on the lawn. Another

man was sitting on a bench just outside the door in the shadows, his features not easily distinguishable from where Kirk was standing.

The man was not there by accident. Until his orders changed, the man would always be there, discreetly following, listening, watching. Kirk would do nothing, see no one, without that man knowing. He would be a second shadow.

As Kirk turned and disappeared into the woods, his shadow silently stood and followed. Jarret watched until they were long out of sight, then turned and went up the stairs to Kirk's room. He quietly let himself in and looked around.

From his years of living on Federation vessels, Kirk had learned the habit of tidiness. Everything in the room was organized, making Jarret's task of searching his belongings a great deal easier, but he found little of value. Kirk was traveling light and seemed to have nothing of interest to anyone but himself. Nevertheless, Jarret took microprints of everything, in case there was something he did not recognize that might make sense to someone else. Leaving the room exactly as he had found it, he went back downstairs to command headquarters.



Kirk was lost in the peacefulness of the woods. He had given up any thoughts of using the walk for exercise and strolled along the sun-spotted path, letting his senses drink in the tranquillity of his surroundings. There was no noise, no disturbance, just the sound of the wind moving gently through the branches high above his head. Rounding a curve in the path, he came upon a small lake surrounded by rocks and trees, the sun reflecting on the slightly rippled surface, the breeze stirring the water to gentle movement. He sat on a rock by the edge of the water for a few minutes, watching the pattern of the waves as they flowed toward the shore. Finally, unable to resist, he pulled off his boots and rolled up his trousers. It had been a long time since he had paddled out in a lake and the thought was irresistible.

The water was cool and the ground gave beneath his feet like soft velvet. He found himself dancing around, splashing at the water with his hands, and laughing. He felt like a small boy again.

He saw he wasn't alone. Again, dark eyes were looking at him from the same serious face that he had found so disturbing earlier that morning. For a ridiculous moment he felt like a guilty child caught doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing. Shaking off the feeling, he returned the look.

"Hello, Tad. Are you supposed to be here by yourself?"

No answer. Kirk smiled and waded out of the lake. Retrieving his boots, he pulled them on and rolled his pants down over them. The whole process was solemnly watched by the young boy.

"Well," said Kirk, "what do we do now? Will you take me to..." He broke off, suddenly realizing that he didn't know the name of the blonde girl who had been with Tad and had no idea where to start looking. Maybe if they went back to the lodge, the manager would know where to find her.

"Come on, let's get you back to where you belong." He held out his hand, but there was no answering move. He slowly squatted down. "We can't stay here all day. It's almost lunchtime. Aren't you getting hungry? I know I am. Why don't we go back to the lodge and get some ice cream or something? I'd like a really gooey sundae myself."

Again he held out his hand, this time without getting up. Slowly, almost like a frightened animal, Tad approached him. Kirk waited quietly while a small hand hesitantly reached out and timidly took hold of his. Again the look from the depths of those dark eyes reminded Kirk of his first officer. *What could this small child know of life that would force him so far from human contact? What would make him feel so apart?* Kirk had had little to do with children; his lifestyle had kept him away from forming the usual family unit. He wasn't sure what to do now, how to break through to find the boy under the hard surface.

He stood up slowly. Tad's grip tightened fiercely as he moved. The boy seemed to be afraid of losing Kirk once he had taken the big step of making contact. Together they turned and started back down the trail, Kirk carefully matching his strides to the small child walking beside him. He felt responsible for the little fellow and wished there was something he could do to communicate with him.



She watched them emerge from the woods, the small hand firmly clasped in the larger one. She nodded slightly to herself. Yes, the strength she had seen earlier that morning was not imagined. *This man is not afraid to be friends with a child.* She saw him look down at Tad and had an opportunity to study him more closely without his noticing.

He was plainly dressed, the dark shirt and tan pants obviously of good quality but not showing any of the extremes that were so fashionable in some parts of the galaxy. His air of quiet authority and self-assurance were subtly present, both in his movements and expression. She could sense her curiosity stirring. Who was he? Obviously he was here by himself; he had been alone at breakfast and now he had only Tad accompanying him. A slight smile

crossed her face as she laughed at herself. It had been several years since she had last looked at a man as a man and not as a colleague or a patient. She wondered briefly at her feelings. She saw the man and boy drawing near, and unconsciously straightened her tunic.

Kirk noticed her and changed direction. He could feel Tad starting to trail behind a bit. He smiled as he came up and she felt her heart pump in the same erratic way it had done earlier in the dining room. She returned his smile and looked at the small boy who was clinging to his knee.

"I see you've found a friend."

"He must have seen me leave the lodge, and followed me," said Kirk.

She nodded, but her mind didn't seem to register what he said. "You're the first person he's touched in over a year," she said almost to herself. Noting Kirk's look of surprise, she continued. "Tad is somewhat of a loner - he doesn't like contact with anyone." She seemed reluctant to say anything further.

"Well," said Kirk, freeing his leg but taking Tad's hand again, "I promised him we would make contact with a very large, gooey sundae in the dining room, if that's all right. Would you like to join us?"

"It's a great idea, and I accept the invitation," she said laughing, "although I think I will stick to coffee and let you men get down to the gooey stuff." She reached for Tad's other hand but he disappeared behind Kirk's leg. Smiling an apology, Kirk led the way indoors. He was looking forward to the treat. After all, it wasn't every day he indulged in an ice cream sundae. McCoy would probably have a fit!



The shadow came in shortly after they entered the dining room. He glanced at Kirk as he passed the doorway, a frown crossing his face when he saw with whom the starship captain was sitting. Then he saw Jarret at the desk and went over.

"You saw who he's with?"

Jarret nodded. "Where did they meet?"

"Just outside the woods. He had the boy with him. They stood talking for a few minutes, then came in here." He looked toward the dining room, running a hand over his face, and turned back to Jarret. "You'd better see the commander about this. I think we're in for trouble."

Jarret looked at him for a moment, nodded, and slipped out from behind the desk. "Keep following him. I'll be back as soon as I can."



The dishes in front of them were empty. She didn't know who looked more satisfied - the man or the boy. Finishing her coffee, she stood up. Kirk rose at the same moment and reached across the table, lightly touching her arm. "Do you have to go?"

"I'm afraid I have to take Tad back to the Compound." Seeing Kirk's crestfallen look, she relented. "But I haven't had lunch yet - and you really haven't either," she said, looking at the empty ice cream dishes. "Would you like to come with us?"

Kirk felt a small arm wrap itself around his leg. Looking down, he saw the dark eyes once again fixed on his face. Reaching down, he hoisted Tad onto his shoulders and turned to her. "I accept your invitation." Small hands clung onto his hair as they left the dining room.

The main doors were still swinging gently as they entered the lobby. By the time they made it through onto the veranda, the man was snoozing in one of the large chairs. He watched them as they moved down the stairs, then silently got up and followed them.



The Compound turned out to be an advanced center for the treatment of child disorders. They dropped Tad off at his room, or rather she peeled him off, and then she and Kirk went to lunch.

After they were seated, he looked at her with a rueful grin. "You know, I've been terribly rude. I don't even know your name."

"Nor I yours," she said. "I'm Jenny Dores. My profession is medicine. I'm doing advanced studies in mental health. I'm here for a year; nine months have already passed. I like reading, swimming, and a certain amount of time to myself. I have two brothers and a sister - no husband. My parents are retired and live on Earth. I'm the youngest, but I'm not going to tell you my age. Did I leave anything out?"

Kirk laughed. "I don't think you could have. I've rarely heard such a complete introduction." He looked at her speculatively for a few moments. "You said your name is Dores. That's a pretty famous name in diplomatic circles. Would you happen to have a relative named Mark?" Her face clouded slightly for a reason he could not discern. He continued hastily. "I met a Mark Dores on Wantu and you resemble him a great deal. And, before you commit yourself, I liked him."

Jenny smiled a little. "Yes, he's my brother. But you don't look much like a politician..."

Kirk's eyebrows lifted and a quiet chuckle crinkled his eyes. "No, I'm not, thank heaven. I don't think I could ever be devious enough to qualify! But you're very open for living in a political family. How do you know I'm a man of honor? I could have evil intentions."

A serious look crossed her face. "Tad trusts you. Children sense things more than adults. You're the first person he's opened himself to since he came." She threw her serious mood aside and good humor glinted from her eyes. "But I'm getting away from the introductions. I still don't know who or what you are, except that you're not the boogie man."

"Jim Kirk. My profession is military. I'm pursuing R & R and I'm here for one week, one day of which has already passed. I like reading, chess, and..." his face softened visibly, "...an attractive woman."

She blushed but didn't drop her gaze. "Isn't Laun rather off the normal route for a week's vacation?"

"Blame my first officer. He literally pushed me out the door."

"First officer? Then you're a..." But of course, she thought. *That explains his air of authority.* She had met powerful men both in her parent's home and in her profession, and this man had many of those same qualities. But he also had a gentleness that she had never seen before in a man and found herself attracted by it.

His answer brought her back to the present. "USS Enterprise," he said with a grin.

"But that's a Constitution-class starship!"

Kirk nodded, his smile growing wider as he noted her confusion following her outburst. "Someone has to make sure the ship gets steered in the right direction."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to sound so stupid. But, to let out a deep, dark secret, ships fascinate me. I was tempted to join the service once, but I got sidetracked into medicine. I've heard all sorts of stories about starship captains, but I've never met one before."

"And I'll bet you're disappointed to find that they're merely human."

She looked at the hazel eyes and thought to herself. *Human, maybe, but not just 'merely'.* She felt a bit foolish by the effect he was having on her - cool, sensible Jenny. She shook herself mentally and concentrated on what Kirk was saying. He was talking about Tad.

"He arrived here about a year ago. His parents were both university professors - brilliant people. So's Tad for that matter - One day he arrived at school with a note pinned to his coat saying that his parents didn't like being responsible for him, and that they had left. Tad could do what he liked with his life. He was five at the time. Apparently he had been a loving child, but not loved in return. Then this complete rejection. He withdrew into himself, and no amount of therapy seemed to do any good. He was sent here as a last resort, as are all our kids."

Kirk's face grew grim as he listened to Jenny talk. She caught a glimpse of the iron that forged his command image. His voice was quiet when he spoke, but she could sense the anger behind the words. "There can't be any excuse for anyone treating a child like that, especially his own parents!" Then a puzzled look came over his face as something she said struck him. "He's very small. I would have thought him to be only about four."

"No, he's seven now, but he is tiny. I don't think he's grown at all in the time I've known him. But some kids do that. He'll spurt up one of these days. You probably did."

The devastating smile was back. "I'm still waiting for the last two inches. Six feet seems such a good height."

And I'll bet you could care less, she thought. Outwardly she smiled, but said nothing.

"I thought all the Dores were in politics," said Kirk. "What brings you to Laun?"

Jenny told him of her plans to go into the diplomatic service until the day she had gone with a friend to visit a younger brother, brain-damaged, at a state institution, and how the experience had changed her life. Now her world was filled with those children who had no one else. Graduate studies had brought her to Laun where the Tolby Center was located. There were centers all through the galaxy for the treatment of child disorders, but they did not have Dr. Alex Tolby at their head. The results he achieved with mental illnesses were nothing short of phenomenal. She felt very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with him.



When lunch was finished, they went their separate ways. Jenny went back to work, and Kirk started back to the lodge with every intention of sleeping away the afternoon.

His sense of uneasiness was back. Walking down the trail leading away from the Compound, Kirk had the feeling of being followed. Several times he stopped abruptly and was sure he saw the movement of a shadow. *Why would anyone follow me? It doesn't make sense.*

When he got back to the lodge, the main desk was empty. He ran lightly up the stairs and ducked into a dark

alcove just down from his room. A lithe figure followed and went to the door of Kirk's room. He seemed to be listening for something as he stood there. From his hiding place, Kirk had a good view of him. The man seemed ordinary enough: light brown hair, plain features, medium height - the sort of person who would make no impression on you if you glanced at him. *Why is he here? What does he want?*

The man stayed only a moment, then disappeared back the way he had come. Kirk followed him to the top of the stairs just in time to see the man disappear into Jarret's office. Thoughtfully, Kirk went to his room. He lay down on the bed to think the problem through, but the quiet surroundings and large lunch soon made themselves felt. He drifted off to sleep.



The shadows were long when he awoke. The sky was beginning to show colors of approaching sunset. On an impulse, he went back to the lake where he had found Tad earlier in the day. He arrived in time to see the most spectacular sunset he had ever witnessed. He was caught in the wonder of nature's beauty until there were only purple streaks left in the western sky. He smiled to himself as he climbed down a bit stiffly from the rock. He would have to watch himself - most people's image of a Starfleet Captain would not include sitting for an hour on a hard rock watching a sunset. Then, thinking of one person in particular, he doubted if it would surprise her much. As a matter of fact, Jenny would probably enjoy it as much as he had. He decided that he would invite her the next evening to find out.



"He sat on a rock for an hour doing nothing?"

Jarret shrank slightly from the scorn and disbelief in the commander's voice. "I know it sounds impossible, sir, but that's exactly what he did. He came back from the Compound at two-thirty and went straight to his room. He left again at eight-thirty and went back to the lake. He sat and didn't move for an hour. He then returned to the lodge, had dinner and went back to his room. He's been there ever since."

The commander watched Jarret carefully. There was definitely something strange going on, but so far, Kirk had done nothing to threaten them. "Continue with your duties, Jarret. Let me know only if anything unusual happens. I don't care if he sits beside a lake. I want to be told only things that are useful in discovering why he is here!"

Jarret shook a little under the blast, but answered with a carefully neutral voice. "Yes, sir, carry on with the original orders."



There was a quiet knock on Kirk's door. He was awake but loathe to do anything about it. The knock came again, this time a bit louder. He got up and grabbed his robe from the end of the bed. Opening the door, he was surprised to find Jenny and Tad. Before he had a chance to say anything, Tad had wrapped his arms around Kirk's knee. Jenny looked embarrassed at finding him still in bed.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I didn't realize you weren't up yet."

"The name's Jim, and you're not bothering me in the least. I should have been up hours ago. Come in." Detaching Tad from his leg, he stepped back and allowed Jenny to lead him into the room.

She turned to face him. "This is awfully presumptuous of me. Here you are on vacation and we've landed right in your lap. You probably have a thousand things you want to be doing right now."

Kirk smiled. "As a matter of fact, I do, and they all need the company of Tad and yourself."

She looked at him, a faint blush coloring her bronzed skin. "I'm being purely selfish, Jim. You've touched Tad somehow and I don't want to lose that opening. Do you mind terribly?"

Kirk's face took on the soft look that had hit her so forcibly the day before. "That's not being selfish, Jenny. I'm happy to help in any way I can."

"Jim, you're a generous person..."

"Not really," he interrupted laughing. "I'd much rather have company on a vacation. It's boring having to talk to myself."

She laughed in return and he immediately thought of the previous day in the dining room. He was so comfortable with her that he seemed to have known her forever, yet they had met barely twenty-four hours earlier. His thoughts were interrupted by his knee being trapped again by small arms. Reaching down, he swung Tad high into the air. "So, Tad, looks like we're stuck with each other."

There was no answer - no smile, no change of expression. But there was less hesitation in the large, dark eyes. Tad might not be ready to open himself to any possibility of hurt, but at least he wasn't cringing away.

Kirk excused himself and headed for the bathroom, doing his best to discourage Tad, but not succeeding. Smiling apologetically at Jenny, he shut the door behind them.

She wandered around the room, trying hard not to snoop into his belongings. He had a book on the floor beside his bed. Picking it up, she discovered it contained the works of John Donne, poet, Old Earth. Her eyebrows lifted. *There are many facets to this man, she decided; it would be nice to know him better.*

A short time later, Kirk and Tad reappeared. The former was freshly shaved and neatly dressed in a leisure tunic and pants that accented his muscular build. She tried not to stare. Normally she was objective about people, but something about this man made all her ethics go right out the window. She turned her attention to Tad whose face was slightly flushed.

Seeing her look, Kirk said solemnly, "We men had to shave. Tad's beard was a bit tough."

Her heart melted. To take the time to do that with a boy he hardly knew...Kirk was busy putting away some scattered belongings, and missed Jenny's speculative gaze. *This is a starship commander, she thought, but he's also an extraordinarily sensitive man. The two qualities are unusual. Sensitive people are so open to hurt.*

She noticed that Kirk was looking at her curiously, and she quickly brought her train of thought back to the present, burying the ever-present medical mind that so easily saw people as objects for analysis.

"Well," she said, "I've got a picnic lunch packed and know the perfect place to eat it. Why don't we go down and have some coffee, Jim, to get you going, then the three of us will have a day of fun."

"Sounds good to me," Kirk said, lifting Tad into his arms before his knee was trapped again. "Shall we go?"



Kirk decided Jenny's choice of appealing places was perfect. The woods offered a lovely carpet of pine needles just begging to be sat upon. The waters of the small lake were lapping quietly a few feet away and the sunlight filtering through the branches made a dappled, dancing pattern on the forest floor. Disappearing behind trees, they changed into bathing suits. The water was clear and cool. Kirk paddled around on his back with Tad clinging to his shoulders. The small boy was very quiet at first, then started to give little kicks. Kirk moved to a more shallow area where he could stand and coach Tad on the finer arts of staying afloat. Jenny, having finished her swim, sat on the shore watching them. Kirk glanced her way occasionally and she shouted praise and encouragement to them both.

When Tad finally got tired, they waded in and flopped down on the blanket Jenny had spread out under the trees. The meal was a great success. She had packed all her favorite foods, and they seemed to be Kirk's, too. The swim had tired all of them; they ate in silence, an occasional smile passing between Kirk and Jenny.

Tad pressed close to Kirk's side, his sandwich clutched firmly in his hand. Its contents were in danger of slipping out so Kirk reached down to repack them. Tad pushed him away with his elbow.

Jenny smiled. "That's the first time I've seen Tad even attempt to do something for himself." The little fellow was busy trying to get the layers pushed back between the slices of bread.

"I always found peanut butter easier at that age," said Kirk.

"You're destroying all my fantasies about starship captains."

Kirk seized the opportunity. "Jenny, I want to destroy all of them. I've got something I'd like to show you tonight. Would you come out with me?"

She hesitated, not sure what he meant, then laughed at herself. "Thank you, Jim. I'd like to go out with you very much."

After lunch was finished, Jenny stretched out for a nap in the sun while Kirk took Tad exploring through the woods surrounding the lake. They paused at an outcropping of rocks which stretched into the water. Standing knee-deep in the lake, they carefully dug out one of the brightly colored stones that were native to the planet.

"Look, Tad. See how the sun catches the stone? The green looks almost like emerald."

Tad took the stone and carefully moved it, watching as the sun caused the colors to burst forth. He stood in awe for a few moments, then looked up at Kirk who was standing beside him. Their eyes held for a moment and Kirk saw a silent longing starting to grow in Tad's hesitant gaze. He reached down and ruffled the boy's hair.

"Let's see if we can find some more stones, shall we?"



The sun was low in the sky as Kirk carried Tad up the trail leading to the Compound. The small arms were wrapped around his neck, the dark head resting on Kirk's shoulder. Long, dark lashes fanned out over pale cheeks. The sleep of contented exhaustion had finally caught up with him.

Leaving Tad in the capable hands of his ward nurse, Kirk turned to Jenny. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes. First my surprise - then dinner." Jenny nodded, amused at his eagerness, and went to change, knowing just which dress she was going to wear.



They did not speak for a long time, but sat side by side on the large, moss-covered log, watching the brilliant

spray of scarlet clouds slowly turn to purple. His hand found hers and he could feel the soft warmth of her fingers curling around his own. The woods around them started to darken. He turned to her, his hazel eyes catching the fading light and looking almost green.

"Well?"

She shook her head, words somehow seeming inadequate to express what she felt. He seemed to understand for he did not press her. He stood up, gently pulling her to her feet. Blue eyes met his look head on, his question answered with no words spoken as he drew her to him. His kiss was as she had imagined it would be, so full of strength yet so gentle. She felt herself losing track of time and reality, becoming lost in emotions she hadn't known she possessed. When it ended, she was winded, her heart pounding fiercely in her chest. Jenny knew she was blushing and silently blessed the darkness.

"Come on, we're going to miss dinner." Kirk's voice didn't sound completely steady. Could it be that he was feeling the same way she was? That's impossible. He's a man of the world, probably has a girl in every port, she gently chided herself as they turned to walk back to the lodge. His arm came around her waist possessively and she knew she felt a little like Tad - here was, indeed, a safe haven.



Dinner was long since over. All the conversation had been about her and her relatives, how her family had been instrumental in the governments of many of the large planets, dating back to North America, Old Earth. She told him of the surprisingly large number who had mysteriously died. It was a grim joke in her family that a Dores either grew up and married, or went into politics and was murdered - and so it had been for generations. She had shared with Kirk the problem of being a Dores, how it could complicate a life with the high expectations of each person's contribution. She had never discussed it with anyone before, but he seemed to understand.

They went out onto the large lawn behind the lodge. The air was full of fragrant smells and the night noises rang loudly in their ears. They sat on a stone bench at the far end of the grass and the silence stretched comfortably out between them.

Jenny found her analytical mind coming to the fore again. Jim had talked so little about himself that she wondered about it. He did not seem a shy person but an air of loneliness surrounded him, even in the peaceful setting of the lodge. He was sitting there, his mind obviously far away. *What drives him?* she wondered. *What are his values? Does he have anyone special in his life? As attractive as he is, there must be someone.*

"What are you thinking about, Jim?"

His eyes came back into focus and he looked a bit sheepish. "You probably wouldn't appreciate it if I told you."

She smiled. "I gather that I'm not the first and foremost."

"Afraid not. I was thinking about the *Enterprise*."

"Duty first? You're supposed to be on vacation. Surely your first officer can look after things for you."

"Spock? Yes, he can command, but she's my ship, my responsibility..." His voice trailed off. She didn't want to lose the moment. He was starting to talk about his life, his world, and Jenny wanted to learn all she could about it.

"Jim," she said seriously, "are you happy in what you do? Command can be such a lonely position. How do you manage?"

Kirk didn't answer and again his mind seemed to be elsewhere. She assumed he wasn't going to answer, but he said in a low voice, not looking at her, "I always wanted to be in Starfleet, Jenny, from the first time I saw ships which had come from other worlds. There's a whole galaxy out there to be explored - a million unknown worlds waiting to be discovered. Think of it: the opportunities we have, the opportunities that have been opened to no other generation before us!"

She smiled at the boyish enthusiasm in his voice. Somehow she had suspected this side to his nature. She had sensed it lurking under the controlled surface.

"But command separates you from other people, Jim. It's a known fact in medical science that command can destroy due to the loneliness it causes..." Her serious eyes held his and he knew her next question came from honest concern. "Are you lonely? Do you have anyone you can turn to?"

His eyes continued to hold hers. She had asked him something that he had never spoken of, something that was very special. He wasn't ready to share that part of his life with anyone. Yet he had to say something.

Kirk took a deep breath. "Am I lonely? Yes, occasionally. I think everybody is. I don't know that I'm different from the next person. Do I have anyone I can turn to?" He looked down at his folded hands. "There are two people who make my life worthwhile. Bonds are formed when people are thrust together, Jenny; when your life so often depends upon your trust of the other person. I would gladly give my life for either of them..."

He stopped talking and she almost stopped breathing. She had never heard anyone express love as a part of living. Most people would avoid such a commitment. She felt envious. Whoever those people were, they were fortunate.

Kirk ran his hand through his hair and looked at Jenny with a slightly embarrassed grin. "I'm sorry. I don't usually babble off like that - must be the company."

Jenny got up from the bench and Kirk rose with her. She moved to face him. "Don't ever lose that love, Jim," she said. "It's part of you - probably one of the few things that keeps you sane." Then, feeling things were getting a bit out of her control, she laughed. "Enough of this. You're here to sleep and I'm keeping you up all night. I've got to go to work tomorrow, even if you don't."

Kirk smiled and offered her his arm. They walked slowly back to the Compound. She stopped at the gate. "Goodnight, Jim. Thanks for today, and for listening to me."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Jenny? You and Tad?"

She smiled. "If you can stand us again."

"No problem." He leaned down to give her a gentle kiss, and stood at the gate to watch her move across the Compound. After she had disappeared indoors, he turned and started back to the lodge. Close behind was his ever-present shadow.



Kirk's days of sleeping in were over. As soon as Jenny would let him, Tad would be at the lodge. Each morning Kirk would wake up to a small body hurtling through the door. Occasionally, Jenny would be with him, but more often she would leave Tad and Jim to themselves, hesitant to intrude on the special relationship that was growing between them.

Each day, Kirk found himself becoming more aware of the world around him, seeing it through the eyes of a child, being reintroduced to life in a way he had long forgotten. He and Tad covered hours and miles - walking, exploring, swimming, climbing... As they moved to each new adventure, Kirk would talk to Tad. He would discuss what they were doing and what they were going to do. He would point out things that Tad had never seen before and show him how they could be used. They spent a long time with Kirk's communicator, Tad listening carefully as the captain explained its function.



Jenny stood by and watched them, wise enough not to interfere. After Kirk brought Tad back to the Compound each afternoon, he would invariably wander into her office to see what she was doing. She looked forward to his coming, to have him sitting, quietly waiting for her to get finished with her day's work, or to watch him as he wandered around, leafing through the books that were piled high on the shelves. He fascinated her - he was a man who knew his own life, who knew what he wanted, who knew where he was going. Yet he wasn't ruthless; he was a man who cared for others.

As Kirk spent his days with Tad, his nights were spent with Jenny. She brought out the wealth of tenderness he had forgotten he possessed. They made no demands of each other, they were just content in each other's company.

But the days passed too quickly. The *Enterprise* was due to arrive the next morning and Kirk was experiencing emotions he wasn't used to. As Jenny lay in his arms that night, she felt a difference. Jim seemed preoccupied. She reached up and ran her finger along the line of his jaw, her eyebrows raised. He grunted and caught hold of her finger, a tiny smile showing at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not being much of a companion, am I?" He swung out of bed, reaching for the robe on the floor beside it. She watched the movements of his lean body as he shrugged into the garment, then propped herself up on the pillows.

"What's bothering you, Jim? That you have to leave today?"

He started guiltily. He hadn't realized he had been so obvious. He turned to her and their eyes held. He seemed at a loss for words. Jenny knew that whatever was said now was important; he must not feel that he owed her anything but his friendship.

"Jim, we've discussed this before. I'm a scientist, you're a starship commander. I'm a Dores. That complicates life enough right there. You have your ship, your crew. You don't have time for anything else. However much we like each other, that's as far as it can go. We don't have time for anything else. There is no way our lives could combine without great inconvenience, and that would only cause resentment."

He looked so serious standing there that she bounced up and kissed him on the end of his nose, then sat down on the pillows, grinning impishly up at him.

He moved to the side of the bed and took her hand. "There are few women who would say that, Jenny. You're so beautiful and so practical. It's such an extraordinary combination!"

She laughed. "It's probably because you don't get entangled with a medical mind every day."

Sensing it was a good time to go, Jenny slipped off the bed. Kissing him lightly, she dressed quickly. "I'll see you before you go. I have some things to do at the Compound. Tad will be over later. Be gentle with him. I've warned him you're leaving. I don't know how he's going to take it."

After she left, Kirk tried to sleep, but eventually gave up. Dressing in his Starfleet uniform, he decided to have an early breakfast, his last meal before he faced the synthetic fare of the *Enterprise*, and probably one of McCoy's diets as well. When he finished, he decided to take a stroll around the grounds of the lodge. It promised to be another beautiful day.



"He must suspect something! That makes the third time he's gone around the lodge."

"His ship's arriving today to pick him up...or at least that's what he said."

The commander looked at Jarret. "I think we'd better find out exactly what he knows and stop him before he learns any more."

Jarret looked worried. "Don't you think his officers will question his disappearance?"

"Plan an accident, a fatal one. You're good at that. Make sure it looks convincing, but first I want to question him. I don't like having the Federation snooping around."



Tad ran excitedly up the trail leading to the lodge. Despite Jenny's fears, he did not seem terribly upset at the prospect of Kirk's leaving. Maybe he had come out of himself more than she thought. Maybe Jim had proved to him that people did care, and that he could trust them. Tad had found a beautiful stone on his way over from the Compound. He carried it proudly, carefully, as though it were a precious gem.

He saw Kirk walking behind the lodge and turned off the trail to take a short-cut through the woods. Suddenly he stopped dead. In front of him was a man lining up the sights of a Rigelian dart gun. Tad stood frozen in horror, seeing that the gun was aimed directly at Kirk. He heard a slight ping and Kirk dropped to the ground. The man remained still for a few seconds, checking to make sure that no one had seen Kirk fall, then moved forward, missing the small, frightened boy standing so close to him.

Jarret moved swiftly into the clearing and another man joined him, sliding out from the shadows of the building where he had been hiding. Together they picked Kirk up and carried him to the lodge. Tad sprinted into action and raced after them, close enough to see a section of the wall slide back and the two men disappear into the opening with their burden. By the time he arrived, there was only a blank wall staring at him. As he stood there, fear closed in. For a moment in eternity, he had felt the warmth of human contact and now it had been abruptly torn away from him. He was alone.



Kirk felt like his head was going to drop off; a tight band, running across his forehead, wasn't helping the throbbing very much. He was unable to move his arms or legs. He tried to open his eyes, but was hit with such a blinding light that he quickly shut them again. He knew there were other people present for he could hear them moving about, talking quietly among themselves.

Jarret looked at Kirk's naked figure strapped to the table, and turned to a slender, blond man who was working a control panel at the table's head. "He's coming around, Darney. Time to call the commander."

The other man looked up at Jarret, then glanced at Kirk. "This thing makes me sick," he muttered to no one in particular and left the room.

"Don't let the commander hear you say that," said Jarret softly to the empty space. "It's his pride and joy."

Kirk heard the exchange but didn't understand, and didn't waste time worrying about it. He tested his bindings and discovered he was firmly strapped down; the broad bindings crossed his thighs and calves, his chest and arms. The metal he was lying on was cool to his skin, but he could feel the sweat on his face.

A voice rose above the others. "Captain Kirk?"

He opened his eyes cautiously. The light was still there, but not nearly as strong. He could make out the outline of a figure standing in the shadow behind the light, but could not see any details of the face. Kirk didn't answer. He would first try to find out why he was there. So far, nothing made sense.

"We hate to inconvenience you like this, Captain, but we really can't let you go after what you have learned here."

Kirk's expression didn't change, but his mind was working furiously. Learn what? What is this man talking about?"

"My men have been following you. You say you're on vacation. I think differently. Evidence indicates the Federation knows that we're here and has sent you to confirm that fact. Now your ship is coming to pick you up and

destroy our operation. I can't let that happen, Captain. I'm sure you can appreciate my position."

Kirk attempted a reply. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've been here on vacation..."

Searing pain shot through him. His breath whistled out of his lungs. His body tried to arch upwards but was held securely to the table by the broad straps. The pain ended as quickly as it had begun, leaving Kirk gasping for air.

The quiet voice came again. "I'm afraid I don't believe you, Captain. No one just comes to Laun - especially Federation representatives. You'll have to come up with a better explanation than that."

He paused, but the only sound was the desperate heaving as Kirk tried to get air into his demanding lungs. A tiny smile touched the commander's lips. "I see you find your present position uncomfortable, Captain. You will find it can become worse. This set of instruments in front of me selects pain levels and has already recorded your optimum level. Cooperate, and the pain will cease. Refuse, and I can set this to kill. There will be no muscle or nerve damage, no trace of what caused death. Just a turn of the dial will put the machine on a setting slightly above what you can tolerate. Death will come slowly and with excruciating pain. Now, Captain, surely you don't want to go through that. Wouldn't it be easier to talk?"

Kirk's voice was ragged, his lungs demanding still more oxygen. "What...can...I tell...you...if I ...don't... know what you...want?"

The pain came again. Kirk tried to move his head away but it was strapped tight. He clenched his teeth to keep from crying out. He didn't know he could hurt this much. He could feel the sweat being forced out of his tightly bunched muscles.

Then...blessed relief. He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe as regularly as he could. He tried to think clearly. What do they want? Who are they?

"Captain," the voice said again, "it would be better for you if you would tell us what you know."

Kirk tried one last time. "But...I don't know..." His voice broke off in a gasp as the pain shot through his body.

"So be it," muttered the commander as the man in front of him twitched slightly against the tight restraints and went limp.



"I'm sorry, sir, but there is nothing more I can tell you. Captain Kirk had an early breakfast and left the lodge with no message as to where he was going."

Spock looked at the man behind the desk with a thoughtful stare. It was an easy lie, but it was a lie. The man was hiding something.

Spock had beamed down to meet Kirk, but couldn't find him. His belongings were still in his room, packed and ready to go. It was not like the captain to be late.

Spock turned away from the desk and almost bumped into a slender, blonde woman who had been standing close behind him. They faced each other momentarily.

In that brief moment, Jenny got the startling impression that she was looking at Tad. The expression in the dark eyes as the Vulcan turned away from the desk had held a glimpse of worry so like that of the boy.

The Vulcan nodded formally and went to move past her, but the Starfleet uniform caught her attention.

"You're from the Enterprise?" she asked. He stopped and turned back to her.

"Spock. First Officer."

"Oh," she said with a tiny smile. "You're responsible for my wonderful week."

His right eyebrow lifted in a most delightful manner. Seeing his confusion she continued hurriedly, "I meant that without your encouragement Jim would never have taken that leave and I wouldn't have met him."

The Vulcan seemed to understand more than she had meant to convey in that statement. She found herself wondering if this could be one of the people that Jim had told her about, but the man behind the desk was speaking to her and she forced her attention away from Spock.

"Commander Spock has come to meet Captain Kirk, Dr. Dores. Perhaps you have seen him?"

She shook her head, concern clouding her eyes. "No, I've just come over to say goodbye. I saw him earlier this morning, but he didn't say he was going anywhere. He did seem preoccupied though..."

"Perhaps if you are familiar with his habits on this planet, Doctor," said Spock, "you would have some idea where to look for him."

Jenny looked at him, her mind working furiously. "There is one place he might go," she said. "He seemed very fond of the spot. Perhaps he went back for one last look. Come on, I'll take you there."



The pain kept washing through Kirk; his body was starting to show signs of bruising where the tight straps dug

in as his muscles involuntarily tensed. He had almost forgotten what was being asked but his tormentor was relentless. The pain came again and again in great waves, forcing him to cry out in agony. Each time the same question; each time the same response to his gasping reply. When would it end?



The clearing was empty. The small lake glistened in the sunlight, the ground undisturbed by footprints. Her face fell as she looked around.

"He's not here. I was so sure he would be."

But Spock's sensitive hearing picked up a small sound. They were not alone. Motioning her to be quiet, he moved around to the other side of a large rock. Quickly, he scooped up a small figure huddled there. The boy put up no struggle but went rigid in the Vulcan's arms.

"Tad!" Jenny cried. "What are you doing here?"

Spock looked at her, the child still firmly held in his arms. "Is he not supposed to be here?"

Jenny shook her head. "No. Tad's one of my patients from the Compound - it's a center for disturbed children. Jim's been helping me with him. The world turned against Tad at a very early age and it's only since Jim's arrival that he has started to communicate again."

She saw a strange, fleeting look come over the Vulcan's face as if he knew exactly what Kirk meant to the small child in his arms. He gently lowered Tad to the ground.

"Tad," said Jenny, "have you seen Jim?"

He would not look at her. He had withdrawn as totally into himself as he had been before Kirk's arrival. She looked at Spock. His eyes had not left Tad's face. Slowly the boy looked up at him, and Jenny saw what Kirk had seen in Tad's eyes that first time - the yearning, the need for someone to hold onto. The same expression was present in the Vulcan's eyes as well. Two outsiders, each recognizing the other for what he was, feeling a close bond because of their differences.

Spock squatted down, his eyes level with the boy's. "Tad," he said, his deep voice more resonant, threatening to expose the inner feelings, "have you seen Jim?"

No answer.

"Tad, this is very important. Jim might need our help. Have you seen him?"

Tad took a deep breath and nodded.

"Where is he?"

The first step taken, the boy became a veritable whirlwind. A small hand took hold of Spock's sleeve and almost dragged him back toward the lodge. Jenny hurried along behind them, fear stabbing at her heart. What on earth could have happened to Jim?

They stopped outside a blank wall. She turned a questioning face to Spock as Tad pointed toward it. But the Vulcan seemed to take the boy seriously. Pulling out his communicator, he contacted his ship.

"Mr. Scott, I would like you to beam down a tricorder and a phaser to these coordinates. I would also like you to scan the area. Are there any life readings below the level where I am now standing?"

The puzzlement and unasked questions rang out clearly in the voice which answered, but Scott knew better than to ask. It was enough that Spock needed the information.

The requested materials arrived promptly and the information followed soon after. "Aye, Mr. Spock, there's an entire complex under you, separate from the main building. There are twenty-five people there. Do you need any help?"

"Negative at the moment, Engineer, but keep a channel open. The captain has disappeared and I suspect foul play."

"But why, Mr. Spock?"

"Unknown, Mr. Scott. But no one seems inclined to cooperate or is concerned that he is missing. I am going to investigate. If you do not hear from me within one hour, beam down an armed party. I am sure the captain is in the immediate area; however, I do not know if he is still alive."

There was a momentary silence. Scott's voice came again, this time somewhat subdued but grim. "We'll wait one hour, Mr. Spock."

Spock turned to Jenny. "It would be best if you take the boy and go back to the Compound." He saw a stubborn look come into her eyes and felt a momentary flash of irritation - the same irritation that came over him every time Jim Kirk insisted on doing something that was obviously foolhardy.

"Mr. Spock, I'm a doctor. If Jim's hurt he may require immediate treatment."

Spock looked at her, but she couldn't tell what he was thinking. Then he seemed to make up his mind. "Very well, but please try to stay out of danger."

He lifted the tricorder and ran it over the wall. It took only a few seconds to locate the opening device. Pressure from his hand triggered it, and a section of the wall slipped back. He entered quietly, Jenny and Tad close at his heels.

Spock followed his tricorder readings, heading for the largest concentration of inhabitants. They encountered few people, and there were plenty of hiding places when others passed. The complex did not seem to be guarded, nor was there evidence of warning devices. Obviously whoever ran it did not feel threatened.

They stopped at a large junction, the corridors branching out in different directions. Spock stood looking into the distance, trying to decide on the best way to proceed, when his sensitive ears heard Kirk's cry of agony. The Vulcan froze, his stomach tying into a hard knot. The sound was repeated, and this time Jenny heard it as well. She started forward, but Spock's strong arm reached out to prevent her from moving.

"Wait," he said quietly. "If we rush in blindly we could cause him to be killed. Now at least he is alive." His voice sounded more confident than he felt. The cries unnerved him, and it was all he could do to stop himself from doing just what Jenny had tried.

Kneeling down, Spock drew Tad near. The boy's face was white, but he listened to what Spock said, and nodded. Without looking at either of them, he disappeared down the hall.

"You can't let him go off like that!" said Jenny furiously. "He'll get killed!"

"I think not."

They stood quietly, Jenny fuming inwardly at the Vulcan, and Spock listening intently for Kirk's cry. The silence lengthened. Without looking back, Spock took Jenny's arm and they crept forward.



Spock took in the entire scene at a glance. Having done a very good job of evading capture, Tad was standing in the middle of the room. Kirk was strapped to a table, unmoving, showing no apparent signs of life. Three men were with him. One Spock recognized from the main room of the lodge; the other two he had never seen before.

At that moment, Tad ducked between the two younger men and dashed out behind Spock and Jenny. There was a momentary pause as their presence registered. In that time, Spock's phaser found both Jarret and the blonde man.

Suddenly a loud cry came from the tortured man on the table. The grey-haired man stood with his hands on the controls. "Move that phaser, Vulcan," he said, "and I put this machine on kill. Once I do that, Kirk is dead. Nothing can reverse the controls. You kill me, and you kill your captain as well."

Spock stood silently, his eyes moving from the commander to his captain. Every muscle in Kirk's body was taxed to the limit, his hair soaked with sweat, his eyes tightly shut as he tried to fight the pain. The dial moved and Kirk cried out again. Blood was showing around the edges of his bindings.

"Make up your mind, Vulcan. He doesn't have long to live."

Spock laid down his phaser. The dial moved again and Kirk slumped, the desperate heaving of his chest echoing through the room as he fought for breath. Tears were running down Jenny's face as she looked at Kirk. Spock's face was unreadable. The Vulcan felt someone brush against him from behind and remove the communicator from his belt. He did not try to move either hand.

The commander pressed a button and within seconds armed guards filled the room. Spock and Jenny were pushed roughly into chairs and securely tied.

The commander noticed that Jarret was getting up groggily. "Jarret," he said, "security alert, plan C. The Vulcan's ship must be on the alert by now, or he wouldn't be here. Seal off the area and make sure everything is ready."

Jarret nodded, and moved off unsteadily. The other men stationed themselves around the room. Spock could see the odds were stacking up against them very rapidly.

The commander spoke urgently. "Where's the boy?" The guards looked mystified. "There was a boy here! Find him. He must not get out of here alive!"

Jenny's heart hit her throat. Tad doesn't have a chance. He's led such a sheltered life that he wouldn't know these people mean to kill him. Anger flared up as the guards pounded out of the room.

"Leave him alone," she said viciously. "He's only a boy, a sick boy. He can't hurt you!"

The commander's eyebrows rose. "Can't hurt me, eh? Possibly no more than Mark Doros' sister can hurt me. Like you, he'll be better off dead."

Spock looked at Jenny as though seeing her for the first time, but she didn't notice him. Fear was stabbing through her anger as she tried to make sense of that last remark. How does Mark fit into this? What have we run into?

The commander chuckled as he watched her expression change, and turned his attention to Spock. "So Kirk was lying; why else would you be here?"

"We are here," said Spock in his blandest voice, "because the captain was missing and no one seemed to know where he was, or cared."

"Um, an obvious mistake on our part. However, an accident will be conveniently arranged for all of you. And we shall be better prepared to meet your shipmates..."

A moan interrupted him and their attention was drawn to the man strapped to the table. Kirk's eyes flickered open and Spock had to steel himself against the pain which shone beneath the glazed surface. He felt his anger rising, felt the ancient hatred start to burn within himself.

The commander looked at Spock thoughtfully, knowing him to be dangerous, probably one of the most dangerous men he had ever faced. He had heard of Vulcan rage but, up to now, had never witnessed it.

Kirk's eyes seemed to be clearing. He squeezed them shut for a moment, then looked again at the end of the room.

"Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

Jenny looked from Kirk to Spock. Each had blocked out everything in the room but the presence of the other. Neither said anything further, but the look seemed to serve, each understanding what needed to be done.

This is no ordinary relationship, thought Jenny. She glanced again at Spock and saw the burning hatred shining in his eyes as he looked at the grey-haired man across the room. A different kind of fear at his single-minded purpose and barely controlled rage ran through her. She looked back at Kirk, lying with his eyes again closed, fighting his exhaustion, and trying to control his breathing. One word from Jim - that's all. One word would probably stop it.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the older man walking across the room. He stopped in front of the Vulcan. "Spock." He said the name speculatively. "I've heard of you." Spock's eyebrows rose slightly. "I knew a friend of yours. T'Leigt."

Spock froze. T'Leigt, the one friend of his childhood, the only one who seemed to understand the torture of his divided nature. She was being groomed as T'Pau's successor when she had been assassinated by the Brondi, the elite of paid assassins. Suddenly, Spock knew who these people were and why Kirk was being tortured. They had assumed his captain knew who they were. The Vulcan's mind raced quickly. These men were highly dangerous; their respect for life, including their own, was not high.

The commander saw no change in Spock's expression, but the anger in the Vulcan's eyes died. A cold smile played around the old man's lips. The Vulcan knew where he was, knew with whom he was now dealing, and would cause no further trouble. He returned to the control panel; he hadn't finished with Kirk - yet.



Tad had almost reached the safety of the hidden entrance. With his years of withdrawal from people he had built almost an inner radar to their presence and was well-hidden each time someone passed. His heart was hammering in his ears as he crept along; his hands were trembling so much that he was having trouble hanging on to the communicator he had taken from Spock.

The entrance was clearly visible on this side of the wall. He waited until the guard had passed, then pressed the opening device and sprinted across the lawn into the safety of the woods. He flung himself behind a fallen log and lay sobbing and gasping for air, allowing his fear to take control.

Gradually he calmed down and rubbed his arm across his eyes. He caught sight of the communicator lying where he had dropped it. Slowly he sat up and reached out for it. He had made his escape from the complex. Now it was up to him to help Jim; there was no one else.

It had been two years since he had been forced to think, to initiate action. He had given up because of the terrible hurt he had received. Everyone he had loved had left him. He didn't understand everything fully, but if he left Jim now he would be doing exactly what had been done to him. Tad accepted reality.

He looked again at the communicator. It was identical to the one that Jim had shown him a few days earlier. He pulled the grid open and heard the same funny sound that had come from Jim's. But what did he do next?

A voice came out of the communicator. "This is the Enterprise, Mr. Spock. Mr. Spock, is that you? Mr. Spock..."

Tad stared helplessly at the communicator. He had to do something. He steeled himself and opened his mouth. "...He...h...help..."

The other voice sounded again. "Who is this? Please repeat your message."

Tears were flowing down Tad's face. He couldn't get anything out. Jim was dying, he was sure of it, and he couldn't do anything about it.

He tried again. "He...h...help..."

Another voice sounded, this time definite and firm. "Keep your communicator open. There will be an armed party beaming down to your coordinates in a few seconds."



Scott was taking a chance and he knew it, but sensors showed only one life-form at the communicator's coordinates, and it wasn't Vulcan. Something was wrong, and he wasn't going to wait around any longer.

A large contingent of *Enterprise* security personnel beamed down to the shelter of the woods. Scott and McCoy were in the first group. They were met by a small boy with a tear-stained face clutching Spock's communicator.

Gently, Scott took it from him. "Where is he, laddie?" he asked, anxiety strong in his voice.

A trembling hand pointed toward the building in the clearing.

That's not good enough," Scott said in exasperation.

McCoy put his hand on Scott's arm. "Go easy, Scotty. He's too upset to answer you." He looked over at the lodge. "Why don't we go over there and see what's going on."

"All right, Doctor, but I'm not going to trust anyone. Security detail, everyone in the building is to be held in detention, and I don't care if it starts a galactic incident!"

The few people in the lodge were stunned when the *Enterprise* personnel came bursting in. None of them had any idea as to the whereabouts of either Spock or Kirk. Scott ordered an exhaustive search which disclosed an entrance to the complex below. As they started to enter the stairway, Tad grabbed McCoy's arm and started tugging him in the other direction. McCoy and Scott looked at each other, then Scott turned to the others.

"Mr. Daniels, take your men and go this way. Simpson, Waters, you come with us."

Scott and McCoy accompanied Tad and the two security men around to the wall entrance. Scott ran his tricorder over the area where Tad pointed, and found the opening device. "Security, be ready. I suspect they're waiting for us."

McCoy took hold of Tad and steered him out of the way. Scott hit the device and ducked down, narrowly missing being hit by phaser beam. A short time later, he called for McCoy and Tad to join him.

There was a maze of corridors. Tad started off but McCoy restrained him. "No, we'll go last," he said. Scott tuned his tricorder for Vulcan readings and instantly picked up Spock's location. They moved forward cautiously.

The corridors were heavily guarded and their progress was slow. Eventually they were standing outside the room where Spock was being held.

"There's eleven people in there," whispered Scott. "We're outnumbered but I don't think we have any choice. We don't dare wait for the others to meet us."

No one objected. At his signal, they burst into the room. Confusion reigned. Strapped to the table, Kirk could do nothing to protect himself from the flying bodies which kept passing over him. Spock, with his tremendous strength and even stronger anger, tore loose from his bonds and hurled himself at the table. The commander tried to get out of the way, but escape was impossible.

Jenny was quickly freed. She leapt up, grabbing a wicked-looking pole that had been propped up in the corner. She tried to stay out of the way, knowing that she would hamper the others if she waded into the fracas, but used her weapon with vicious efficiency whenever someone got within her reach. She was rewarded by the appreciative look Spock threw her as she bashed away, and she threw a smile of triumph back at him; he hadn't made a mistake in bringing her along.

McCoy frantically loosened Kirk's bindings. He brought out his scanner and ran it over the captain. Taking out his hypo, he injected some much-needed stimulants while avoiding and side-stepping the wild melee that was being conducted throughout the room. When the larger contingent of security personnel arrived, the fight was over.

Spock gently helped Kirk to a sitting position as McCoy's scanner swept over the captain. Kirk gritted his teeth as his body moved. The pain was still quite real, even with McCoy's medication.

A small body flung itself into Kirk's arms, tears pouring down his face.

"Oh, Tad," said Kirk softly, rumpling the boy's hair, "I'm sorry you had to see this, but I'm all right."

The dark eyes looked at him, tears still brimming as a low voice said, "Jim..." He buried his face in Kirk's chest. Jenny and Kirk stared at each other - Tad had spoken!

"You can thank that little fellow for the fact that you're alive, Captain," said Scott, beaming. "If it hadn't been for him contacting the ship, we'd still be sitting up there."

Kirk ran his hand over Tad's head. Bending down, he said softly, "Thank you, Tad. That was a very brave thing you did."

Spock appeared out of the other room carrying the captain's clothes. Kirk was suddenly conscious that he had nothing on in front of a roomful of people, and blushed. McCoy smiled; Kirk would never change.

Jenny took Tad while Spock and McCoy helped Kirk dress. As they talked quietly, she took a good look at the

three, and especially Kirk in relation to them. He was a man in a man's world. It was his world and those were his friends. She remembered the Vulcan's reaction to Kirk in danger, saw McCoy's desperate efforts to help Kirk even while the fight was still blazing. She knew that what she had told Kirk was the truth: he had his life, and she couldn't share it. She was glad that she was able to see that he really did have people who cared for him - and cared for him deeply.

Kirk slid off the table only to discover that his legs refused to support him. He grabbed onto Spock, but his arms felt like rubber and he would have fallen if Spock's strong arms hadn't lifted him back onto the table in one swift movement.

"Come on, you're goin' to Sickbay," said McCoy. He signalled the ship and they were gone before Kirk had a chance to protest.

Spock and Jenny stood watching the fading sparkle, Tad still firmly held in Jenny's arms. Spock stood in silence for a few moments, reaching some conclusion within himself. He turned to Jenny. "We'll be in orbit another twenty-four hours," he said. "I believe he would appreciate it if you would come aboard and bring Tad with you."

She smiled at his quiet understanding of what she had shared with Kirk. "Thank you, Mr. Spock. Nothing would please me more."



Kirk lay savoring the familiarity of his own quarters. Jenny and Tad had just left. Kirk appreciated McCoy allowing him to be there instead of the Sickbay. He still wasn't able to walk, but McCoy assured him the damage was only temporary. With therapy and adequate rest, he would regain control of his muscles. It would probably take ten days or so.

It had been good to see Jenny. He had been worried about her, about feelings which might have been more complicated than he had thought. Seeing her had reassured him that she had really meant what she had said about living her own life and letting him live his. Tad had been almost shy in his presence, a little overwhelmed by the size of the ship and its crew, but he proudly gave Kirk the colored stone that he had found the day before. He came out of himself a little when Kirk gave him the knife he had received from Elaan.

"Remember, Tad this was given as a token of peace and friendship. Violence only hurts - it never helps. Remember what you saw today, and remember who won."

Tad's dark eyes meet the quiet hazel ones he had grown to love. Confidence was starting to show in the black depths instead of only yearning and loss. He nodded, a slight smile flickering across his face.

Kirk and Jenny watched him as he wandered off to look at the other things in Jim's quarters.

"You've done a great thing for Tad, Jim. You've made him realize he's wanted." She turned to him. "If he continues to improve, I'm seriously thinking of adopting him."

A warm smile spread across Kirk's face. He stretched out his hand and took hers in his. "Jenny," he said, "What's ahead for you now, besides Tad?"

"Well," she said, "I have three months left here to finish my fellowship. Then I'll be going back to Earth. I want to start my own center. It'll be hard at first to get it going, but there's a good possibility it'll work. Then once it gets going, who knows? I might go into politics. In a way, I think I was running from a family responsibility. Some people are born for careers; the Dores seem destined for politics. Even the ones who get sidetracked seem to eventually find their way back." She smiled wistfully. "I suppose I'll do the same." Looking at him hopefully she went on. "You met Mark because of politics, maybe we'll meet again for the same reason..."

Kirk smiled. "We don't have to leave it to the chance of fate. I do get back to Earth occasionally. I'd like to visit you, and Tad too, if he's with you."

She nodded. "I'd like that very much, Jim." Fighting back the tears, she had leaned over and kissed him, then quickly got up and called to Tad. He'd flung his arms around Kirk's neck and hugged him tightly. Then they were gone. Kirk lay staring at the door. He had his career; she had hers. She had warned him of the difficulties of being a Dores. She accepted it and he would respect that acceptance.

The buzzer rang and Spock entered. He was pleased to see the color returning to Kirk's face, the drawn look caused by the pain fast disappearing. "Starfleet had been informed of the situation, Captain. We are to leave a contingent of security personnel here until the Federation authorities arrive. I do not think the Brondi will be bothering anyone again."

"The Brondi," repeated Kirk. "It seems so impossible. I thought they were a myth. I almost didn't believe you in Sickbay. I had no idea..."

Spock nodded. "Apparently you accidentally stumbled onto their headquarters. Being a Starfleet official they assumed you knew what was going on and reasoned that you needed to be eliminated."

"Yes," said Kirk. "That would explain why I was being followed. And then I was on that table and they kept

asking me what I knew. I didn't know what they were talking about..." He looked at Spock curiously. "How did you know?"

"Their leader got careless, Captain." Spock did not continue, but his eyes reflected remembered pain. Kirk didn't press him.

He tried to shift his position, and Spock was instantly at his side to assist him. Kirk smiled his thanks. "Well, Spock, since you're in temporary command, where do we go from here?"

"We are about to leave orbit, Captain. We have received orders to take some dilithium crystals to the Lexington. She has had an accident and needs them for repair; nothing dangerous, but she will be drifting until we arrive. The journey will take 17.5 days. I would suggest in that time that you..."

"Stop right there, Spock," said Kirk, holding up both hands. "A week ago I was tired. I admit that. I gave in to you and McCoy and took time off. McCoy has informed me that it will be at least ten days before I will be able to walk again. I think you should stop offering advice. I don't know if I would be able to survive another 'vacation'!"

Spock's eyebrow lifted and Kirk slumped back into the pillows, chuckling at his first officer's offended expression. He knew Spock wasn't taking him seriously. Kirk was, in a way, grateful to him for some parts of the past week. He had met two people who had touched his life in a very special way and whom he would always remember.



But Up to Now

Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott was staring at the doors which had just closed behind James Kirk. The air hung heavy with the words that the Captain had hurled at his First Officer. Scotty looked over at McCoy, but the doctor was staring at the polished surface of the table in front of him. The other occupants of the room were stunned, not believing what they had heard. Then, slowly, they began to disperse. A frown crossed Scotty's face as he thought about what had just occurred. He had seen Kirk in all kinds of situations before, but somehow this was different.

The Enterprise had one hour and thirty-five minutes of power left. The crew was dying, their life forces slowly ebbing away, being drained by the space-amoeba. Each person was reacting in his own way - each fighting a seemingly impossible battle. Scotty was still smarting after Kirk's reaction to his stupid statement.

"I am asking you, Mister. I need answers!"

Then the stimulants began. Kirk was pale when he arrived in Engineering, his face slightly flushed. But his command instincts had not deserted him. He was the one who had agreed with Spock that forward thrust could hold them more stable against the pull, although Scotty could see no sense in it. Each time Scott saw him after that, the Captain was more flushed - in the briefing room, on the bridge after Spock had taken the shuttlecraft into the organism. Still he held firm. Kirk was the one who figured out that anti-matter could destroy the amoeba. Standing beside Kirk on the bridge, Scotty could feel the heat radiating from the feverish man whose mind was refusing to give in to the body's weakness, even though the stimulants were threatening to blast him apart. As he ran to the turbolift to get the magnetic bottle, he heard Kirk ask McCoy for another stimulant and Bones' angry protest.

Hold him together, prayed Scotty silently. Without him we're dead.

It wasn't until Spock was back aboard the Enterprise, after the organism had been destroyed, that Kirk had collapsed, drained and exhausted. Scotty and Spock helped McCoy take him to Sickbay. Lying on the bed, his face relaxed and the flush receding as the drugs broke the fever, the Captain looked ridiculously young. The three of them stood silently around him, no one saying what they were all thinking.

Finally McCoy looked at Spock. "He'll be all right after a good sleep. He was under a tremendous strain."

The Vulcan nodded, then looked at Scotty. "We should get back to the bridge, Mr. Scott."

Taking one last glance at the sleeping figure, Scotty turned to Spock. "Aye, he'll rest better knowing we're looking after things."

McCoy smiled slightly as the Vulcan and Human walked out of sickbay together, the truth of Scotty's statement striking home. He would indeed rest better. Exhausted, he sank down into a chair, one eye watching for any sign that his Captain might need him.



The news swept through the ship - the epidemic on the planet had been diagnosed - Vegan choriomeningitis. It was raging out of control and the natives had had no means of acquiring immunization.

Then the call from Sulu - the Captain was sick. He had said nothing, had been working tirelessly, then - suddenly - blinding headache, high fever, weakness. Spock had gone to get him. Scotty was in the transporter room when they materialized. The Captain was a limp form in the Vulcan's arms, his body refusing to function. But his mind was functioning and he was aware of what was happening.

It was a losing battle. His final order to Spock before he lost consciousness was to help the people on the planet. Scotty shook his head helplessly. Other people always came ahead of Kirk in the Captain's order of things. They were important - he was not!

McCoy had been standing with Scotty in the transporter room, the untested serum ready. It was still experimental - no data on success.

The entire crew was to be immunized. Scotty arrived late in the sickbay. There was no one around. Kirk was lying on a bed in the isolation unit, his face flushed and damp, his hands limp on the covers, his breathing shallow and irregular. Even in his heavily drugged state he was in obvious pain.

"Scotty..."

He jumped - the voice seemed to have come out of nowhere. McCoy was standing in the doorway. Taking a last look at Kirk, Scott followed McCoy into his office.

"Doctor, how..."

"I wish I knew. Not many recover from this. But, he's fighting - just keep your fingers crossed. It's up to him now. If he doesn't let go he has a chance."

The next hours went slowly. The Enterprise remained circling the plague-ridden planet, her medical staff slowly winning the battle being waged on the surface. Scotty tried to keep himself busy in the Engineering department, but his thoughts kept returning to the sight of Kirk lying helplessly in Sickbay. Finally he could stand it no longer and went back.

Spock and McCoy were standing by the side of the bed as he entered unnoticed. McCoy's shoulders were slumped, but Scotty couldn't tell if it was in defeat or relief. Then their words carried to him.

"The fever's broken, Spock. He's going to make it."

Scotty saw the slender shoulders of the Vulcan slowly give, the tense muscles no longer able to hold the rigid pose. As he stood there, Kirk opened his eyes. He alone saw the engineer standing at the door, and he was the only one to see Scotty raise a hand and slip quietly out. He returned to his engines knowing that everything was right with his world.



The senior officers had been warned, but Scotty was still glowing. They had all thought the Captain dead. For the two months it had taken to get back to the planet, he had bitterly denounced Spock in his mind. Because of the Vulcan's unfeeling stubbornness, the warp engines had been completely burned out. Then Scotty was forced to nurse the impulse engines as they pounded along in high gear.

But, somehow, Spock and McCoy had found Kirk alive. He had signalled the ship, sounding as normal as ever - and worried about the Enterprise. McCoy beamed up first and told Scotty what had happened, about Miramane's death and the death of her unborn child. A short time later, Kirk and Spock beamed up together, the Captain still dressed in the buckskins which he had been wearing when they found him. Spock's face was a closed mask; no feature betrayed any feeling for what had happened. Kirk's face was ravaged by his grief - his eyes filled with pain and still bright with tears. Scotty's heart went out to his young commander.

"Captain, I..."

Kirk looked at him and nodded, then walked out, Spock by his side. Scotty drew in a deep breath and quietly followed.

Time passed slowly. Heading for his quarters for a few hours of much needed sleep, Scotty was surprised to meet Kirk. The Captain seemed very unsteady on his feet and his face was pale and drawn, his eyes still filled with pain.

"Captain, can I help you?" asked Scotty with some concern.

Kirk looked a little hesitant, then said, "I'm trying to get drunk, Scotty. I've just gone through my supply of brandy, much to Spock's disapproval. Do you have..."

Scotty smiled gently. "That I do, sir. Come with me."

Putting a helping hand under Kirk's elbow, Scotty steered him to his quarters. Sitting him at his desk, he brought out a large bottle of rare old whiskey. He poured a generous helping for Kirk and winced to see it gulped down like water. Sighing quietly, he refilled the Captain's glass and poured a small amount for himself. They sat in silence for a few minutes, the young commander - the older friend.

"She was beautiful, Scotty," said Kirk finally. "She was open, honest, proud - and I killed her."

"Captain..."

"She wanted to protect me - and she gave her life for me. Her life, and our child's life." Kirk looked up, the tears in his eyes threatening to spill over. Scotty stood up and started toward him. Kirk stood up at the same time, but the combination of grief and alcohol proved too much. He fell forward, and Scotty just managed to catch him before he hit the floor. He was momentarily at a loss, then remembered that the Captain had been with Spock and that the Vulcan was probably frantically looking for him. His hand went to the intercom and the Vulcan arrived in seconds.

"I had been gone from his cabin for only a few minutes, Mr. Scott. I had not expected him to leave. His condition was somewhat unstable..."

"Sometimes, Mr. Spock," broke in Scotty, "a man needs to drown memories - especially those that are too painful to bear." He looked down at the unconscious man. "But in this case, I doubt if it helped."



The woods were steaming, the great rain forest seemed to close in oppressively. The three men were soaking wet, as they had been for the past hour. They seemed to have walked for a hundred miles, although Spock said it had only been two. Scotty wanted to sink down and give up. But they had to get back to the beam down area - the Captain's life depended on it.

Scotty sighed. He should have been the one attacked by the Wilderbird serpent; he shuddered as he mentally saw the fangs sink into Kirk's thigh. He had been the one to anger the Wilder leader, but Kirk took the responsibility and now the vicious poison was spreading through his body. Reports indicated that it was one of the worst deaths that could be experienced.

They had been thrown out into the rain forest to die, weapons and communicators taken. Their only hope was to get back to the beam down area; the planet's natural screens would prevent the *Enterprise* from finding them anywhere else. According to Spock, they had another hour of travel. Even then, it might be too late.

Kirk was weak and pale and now totally disoriented. He had insisted on walking himself, knowing the almost impossible task it would be to carry him. Now with the poison running its course, his legs continued to move, but without the support of Spock and Scotty he would have fallen.

Spock signalled a stop. They gently eased Kirk down against a tree. The pounding rain showed no sign of abating. Kirk slowly lost consciousness as he sat there. Spock did his best to put a dry dressing over the bite wounds, but it did little good. The leg was badly swollen and discolored. Spock's face hardened as he wrapped already sodden bandages around Kirk's thigh.

Wordlessly, they rose, Spock reaching down to pick Kirk up in his arms as easily as if he had been a rag doll.

"You lead the way, Mr. Scott - set the best pace you can."

Scotty looked at the Vulcan, his arms holding the Captain, his face a total mask covering his feelings. He knew anything he said would be wrong, so he nodded and plunged off into the thick forest. There was no talking except for the occasional directional change from Spock.

As time passed, Kirk grew worse. He no longer lay limp in Spock's arms. His fever was rising rapidly, his face flushed and wet, and not only from the rain. He began to mutter and move restlessly, making Spock's progress difficult. The rest periods came more frequently as Spock tried unsuccessfully to still Kirk's feverish movements. As the poison spread and the pain and fever mounted, it was all the two of them could do to try to carry him.

Scotty was exhausted. Kirk was finally quiet but it had taken all of the engineer's strength to hold Kirk's legs while the Captain fought in his delirium. In desperation, Spock had applied the neck pinch.

"I wish you had done that earlier."

A cold stare met his thanks. "I could well have killed him, Mr. Scott. The venom of the Wilderbird serpent is an unknown quality. If it affects the nervous system as does the neck pinch, I may have just ended the Captain's life."

Scotty felt himself go cold. If Spock had just killed the Captain, how could the Vulcan ever live with himself - and he was the cause. Badly shattered, he got up. Spock silently rose and again tenderly lifted Kirk.

With the now-still Captain in Spock's arms, they reached the beam down area. They were almost instantly picked up by the ship's sensors and beamed back aboard.

It was then that Kirk stopped breathing. When asked about it later, Scotty said he supposed he did, too. McCoy, knowing trouble had happened, had an emergency medical team in the transporter room.

Spock quickly but gently put Kirk on the waiting stretcher.

"Wilderbird venom, Doctor. I used the nerve pinch to control his delirium..."

"You what! Spock, you could have..." But McCoy didn't have time to spare berating the Vulcan. The portable cardio-stimulator was already in his hand.

Long moments passed before a heartbeat resumed and in those moments McCoy sent technicians running to the lab for antidotes.

Kirk started to thrash violently - a quick sedative stopped him.

"Well, Spock, at least he survived your primitive attempt at practicing medicine." The voice sounded severe but both Spock and Scotty saw the relief and thanks shining out of McCoy's eyes. They had made it back in time - Kirk would survive.



The message had been false. The distress signal that had brought the Enterprise, as it had the other ships, was a trap. A trap planned by a madman.

Tarnell, he said his name was. He looked like a Klingon but did not wear the uniform of an Empire soldier. This was his planet, he told them, any life forms on it belonged to him, to deal with as he wished. And he proceeded to demonstrate his meaning.

A force field enveloped all of them, Orions, Tellarites, Humans, Vulcans, all equally helpless. Tarnell brought out a long, thin, wire-like blade. The Tellarite was released from the field and the others were given a hint of their fate. The limbs were severed from the body, the cries of agony sounding at every move. And all the while, Tarnell had laughed, a cold-blooded, maniacal laugh.

Then he had turned to Kirk who was standing, frozen, in the force field. Kirk was unable to hide his revulsion behind his command mask, his revulsion - and his fear. Only a stupid man would not be afraid. He looked over at Spock and Scotty - the Vulcan's face was a blank, Scotty's mirrored his own.

Suddenly, the force field was gone. Unprepared, Kirk collapsed. He saw the thin blade whipping down toward his leg - the thin blade that could so neatly sever a limb from the body. He felt paralyzed. He knew his mind was frozen on the horrible images he had just seen - he knew that primal terror was betraying him now - and he knew his tormentor could also see it.

Something suddenly commanded him to move, to fight the numbing paralysis that had enveloped him. He flung himself sideways and kicked out with all the strength that was left to him. Tarnell went down with a crash.

Then he ran. His mind told him to get away from that place and take the alien with him. Spock and Scotty might be able to find a way of breaking free if he could borrow enough time for them.

But he had run as far as he was able to go - his lungs were bursting, his legs getting heavier with each step. Tarnell had recovered quickly and was following him, showing no signs of faltering. His footsteps never varied, sounding louder as he closed the distance between them.

Kirk stumbled and fell, and his hands and knees, already badly scraped and bruised, cried out their protest. He could feel his heart pounding and knew it wasn't only from the exertion of flight.

He had failed. He couldn't get up. He slowly sat down and watched as Tarnell approached. He wouldn't - couldn't - fight any more. His throat went dry at the thought of what awaited him. He heard the whistle of the thin blade. His heart lurched and he shut his eyes as if to hold off the pain.

There was a scuffling noise, then the sound of something hitting the ground. He awaited the blow that never came. Then someone gently shook his shoulder.

"Captain?"

Scotty's voice. Opening his eyes, he saw his engineer kneeling in front of him. Spock was taking the blade out of the unconscious alien's hand.

Seeing the unspoken question, Spock walked over. "When you kicked Tarnell, Captain, the force field was broken, freeing both Mr. Scott and myself. We were momentarily stunned and had a little trouble catching up with you. You were moving somewhat faster than normal."

A slight smile crossed Kirk's face. "A small case of blind terror will often do that to a man, Mr. Spock. Adds wings to the feet." Seeing the Vulcan's puzzled expression, Kirk continued, "Never mind, I know it doesn't make any sense." Looking at Scotty, his smile widened. "I'll bet you just broke the undergraduate record for the quarter mile, Scotty."

"Aye, sir, I probably did. And it's not something I'd like to tackle again in a hurry."



"Twenty-third century technology - man's great achievements. Everything better, bigger, more efficient..." McCoy broke off, unable to bear his own pain, nor to see it reflected in the hazel eyes that looked at him. "Spock of all people...He's dying because of some idiotic bureaucrat who wanted the prototype of the Vulcan Natron Cruiser to be flown in Vulcan's honor by a Vulcan. Not properly tested, and it..."

"Bones, don't..."

McCoy frowned, and downed his drink.

Scotty came in quietly. The medical complex was huge and he had had some trouble locating the Captain. Kirk looked up as he entered. From his expression, Scotty knew the news was not good.

"Captain," he said gently, "you're needed on board. Starfleet wants a complete report immediately - from the commanding officer."

Kirk steeled himself to answer in a normal voice. "Thank you, Mr. Scott."

As he rose, McCoy reached over and touched his arm. "He's got the best care, Jim."

"But, as you said, Bones, he's dying. All the care in the world isn't going to prevent that. And while he

dies - while my best friend dies - I have to report to the bureaucrats." He turned abruptly and left.

Scotty looked at McCoy. "He needs support more than Mr. Spock, Doctor."

McCoy nodded. "And the only person who can give it is going to die, Scotty. How is the Captain going to survive that?"

Kirk managed to get through the endless questioning. He clung to rules and regulations, did not allow himself to think, to realize that he was talking about his friend.

And now it was over. He felt a hundred years old with the weight of the universe on his shoulders.

Then came the summons. Get down to the medical complex immediately. He must have looked like a wild man running through the corridors. McCoy met him at the door of intensive care.

"Jim..."

Kirk brushed him aside. "Bones, not now - leave me alone with him. I don't want to see anyone." He shouldered his way through the door. McCoy and Scotty looked at each other, then peered through the glass in the door.

The Vulcan lay totally still, the machines by his bed whirring and clicking. Kirk could not tell if he was still breathing; there was no movement. Silently, he sat by the bed. He picked up a limp hand and held it to his face. He shut his eyes, desperately trying to control himself, but could not. Hot tears spilled over the Vulcan's hand and arm, dropping on the blanket below.

A weak voice interrupted his grief. "Jim, if you persist in your present action, you are apt to drown us both."

Kirk sat frozen for a moment, unable to believe his ears. Then he looked up. The familiar brown eyes were looking at him; pain showed in their depths, but they were seeing. A huge grin split Kirk's face, his joy visibly radiating around the room. He tried to speak but words wouldn't come.

Spock's fingers squeezed his hand. His eyes closed but the firm hand did not relax.

McCoy slapped Scotty on the back and they quietly left to get drunk.



James T. Kirk had a temper. Everybody on the Enterprise knew it, although few had ever been confronted with it. The occasional smouldering look and snapped reprimand was normally all that surfaced.

But an explosion was imminent. And if the Captain didn't blow first, Scotty would. He looked across the engineering complex at Dr. Richard Daystrom crooning over his computer. The surprise attack was over - the MS had won. Scotty had heard about the 'Dunsell' incident and his heart ached for Kirk, even as his anger stirred against the tall scientist on the other side of the room.

Then a summons from the bridge. Leaving Mr. Harper to see to the engines, he arrived right on the heels of Kirk and McCoy. The Enterprise was out of control - the MS unit was going to destroy an ore ship. There was nothing he could do from there, and he left just as Daystrom arrived.

Kirk, Spock, and Daystrom arrived in Engineering shortly after Scotty. Kirk's eyes were grim, Daystrom was looking flustered. Suddenly, Kirk was flung across the room, flattened by a force field. Shaken, he let Spock help him to his feet. Scotty could see he was holding onto his temper by a thin thread. His words were sharp and bitter in his exchange with Daystrom. The man was trying to defend his computer, and Kirk was getting closer and closer to losing control.

Then Daystrom admitted that he had lost control of MS.

"Captain, I suggest we disconnect it at the source."

Kirk nodded, and Scotty called Mr. Harper. Together they signed Harper's death warrant. A beam of light shot across the room and connected to the main junction, Harper was in the way - and died.

Scotty spun around, horrified. Kirk swung to face Daystrom, fists clenched, boiling mad. He didn't try to control his voice or his feelings.

"That wasn't a minor difficulty - that wasn't a robot! That thing's murdered one of my crewmen and now you tell me you can't turn it off!"

At that moment, Scotty thought that Kirk could be capable of murder. He saw Spock take a step forward, his eyes glued on Kirk's face, ready to prevent the Captain from committing an act he would regret.

But then the Vulcan saw the unit had tapped into the matter/anti-matter reserves. Clear, logical thinking was needed. The cold fury died quickly in the face of necessity and Kirk was once again the commanding officer.

The relief was almost intolerable when the MS was finally destroyed.

Scotty knew he would never forget the look of fury on Kirk's face as he confronted Daystrom and the machine that threatened to destroy the Enterprise.



...Shaking himself back to reality, Scotty noticed that McCoy was no longer in the room. Spock was returning,

along with some other crew members. Not feeling comfortable in the Vulcan's presence, not knowing what to say, Scotty stepped out into the corridor. He caught sight of McCoy standing a little way down from the door and moved toward him. McCoy looked up.

"Scotty..."

"Doctor." For a moment, he hesitated, not really sure in his own mind what he wanted to say. Then, taking a deep breath, he looked straight at McCoy.

"Doctor, I've seen the Captain feverish, sick, drunk, delirious, terrified, overjoyed, boiling mad - but up to now I have never seen him red-faced with hysteria..."



All Things Heal in Time



The struggle finally ceased. Spock stood slowly, then leaned back against the wall, allowing his fatigue to show clearly, too tired to fight his Human half.

His eyes remained on James Kirk lying quietly at last. Janice Lester had meant to hurt and then destroy that man. She had succeeded with the first part of her plan. How successful would she be with the second?

The nights were the worst. It had been ten days since Kirk had returned to his own body; the horror of his imprisonment in hers had not started to fade. The memories kept crashing back: the confusion, the fear, the ultimate panic...

Spock offered what help he could, but mostly he could only suffer silently as he watched his friend struggle with his fears. This was one fight Kirk would have to win for himself. Time, Spock thought as he walked over to Kirk's desk and sat down. Time - the answer and the healer. How much time will need to pass before the mind is healed - and will it happen soon enough?

McCoy had recommended that Kirk keep working, occupy his mind with matters other than Janice Lester. It wasn't entirely successful. A mind, after all, could not be distracted twenty-four hours a day. Night always came and with it came solitude - and memories. And all Spock could do was be there, be there to listen.

The intercom whistled. A fleeting anger crossed the Vulcan's face before the mask settled into place.



The persistent whistle disturbed his sleep. Blearily he opened his eyes in time to see his first officer reaching out his hand to answer the summons. If Lt. Uhura felt surprise to find Spock answering a call in the captain's quarters, none of it reflected in her voice.

"Fleet Signal for the captain, Mr. Spock. Is he available?"

Spock glanced over at Kirk, who was swinging his feet over the side of the bed. As Kirk waved his hand in assent, the Vulcan turned back to the intercom. "Affirmative, Lieutenant, Captain Kirk is standing by."

By the time the image of Admiral Blaney Staunton appeared on the screen, Kirk was presentable. "Jim," said his former Academy Commander, "it's been a long time. How've you been?"

"I'm fine, sir," Kirk answered, trying to ignore the frown on Spock's face. "I gather that this isn't just a social call."

Staunton grinned, but without amusement. "No, it's not. Jim, we've received definite proof that the Klingons are gathering a fleet of warships in Sector 744 - in the easternmost region of the galaxy. The T-17 scout ship had been in that area for seven months gathering data. Now they're sure it's an invasion."

Kirk glanced at Spock, puzzled as to why this information was being directed at him. Sector 744 was an area of space close to their patrol route, but actually in the *Potemkin's* sphere of influence.

Staunton continued quietly, "...but we've got a problem. We don't know when or where..." He hesitated, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Surely you can get that information from T-17, Admiral," Kirk said. "If the Klingons are in neutral territory, we can't do anything to challenge them."

Staunton looked uncomfortable. "Yes; well that's the problem. We need someone to command the T-17..."

Kirk's attention snapped fully on. "Surely the present commander..."

"There is no present commander," interrupted Staunton. "Larry Watson had command - he snapped under the strain and was killed in a freak accident."

Kirk looked at Spock, his eyebrows raised. They both knew Larry Watson. He was, as one of his former first officers had kindly put it, a "fathead". No one could ever figure out how he had managed to get a captaincy; he had

few of the necessary qualities of leadership. Morale under his command was always poor. How on earth had he ever gotten an assignment on a spy ship?

"Jim, I need your help. The crew of the T-17 is one of the best - all men tops in their field. But morale is at an all time low. They've lived under a strain these past few months that would have broken most men. The new commander has to be good or they'll throw him to the wolves. They need a leader, and I need a commander, one who's familiar with the ship..."

Spock felt his stomach tie into a hard knot. "No," he said quietly to himself, "don't ask him. He can't..."

But Staunton asked. "Jim, I need you. The assignment would be temporary, maybe a month, two at the most..."

...and maybe forever if the ship doesn't come back, Kirk thought. Might be just as well. He saw Spock start to lean forward and stopped him with a raised hand and a slight negative shake of his head. "Blaney, can I have a few minutes to discuss this with my senior officers? I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

"I'll be waiting, Jim. Staunton out."

The two men sat in silence, neither wanting to begin the inevitable debate. The Vulcan's face was barely masking his feelings; the Human's looked tired and strained. Troubled hazel eyes finally met the concerned brown ones across the room. "The Klingons seem to feel safe in testing the Organian Treaty..." Kirk's voice trailed off, his tired mind unwilling to face the prospect of what that might mean.

"It would seem so, Captain, or at least they want to see what the Federation might do with a build-up of the Klingon force in neutral space. A build-up does not necessarily mean an attack."

"You heard what Staunton said, Spock. They have the proof. The T-17 has been tagging along with the Klingon force since it started building seven months ago." His eyes lit up momentarily. "Have you ever seen the T-17, Spock?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "I am familiar with the ship, Captain, but have never had the opportunity to board her."

"I have. In fact, I commanded her for a short time about five years ago. She was new then; I took her on a shake-down cruise. She was built especially to infiltrate a Klingon fleet and, outwardly at least, she's indistinguishable from a Klingon scout ship. Inside, she's packed with sophisticated sensor and communication equipment and has an arsenal almost as large as a starship's..."

"It would seem that the Federation did not trust the Klingons."

"Remember, Spock, this was before our run-in with the Organians. I don't think the T-17 has been used much in the past couple of years. Obviously the Federation felt that this Klingon massing was something to worry about, and so they brought her out of moth balls."

"Moth balls, Captain?"

Kirk chuckled. "An old-fashioned way of saying storage, Spock."

Spock nodded and Kirk sensed the alien brain filing away that unfamiliar phrase for future study. "Well," Kirk continued, "guess we'd better get McCoy in on this - I'd need his approval as well." He hit the intercom. "Dr. McCoy, report to the Captain's quarters please."

McCoy, in his Sickbay office, pricked up his ears at the official sounding order. Something's up, he thought. Damn. The last thing Jim needs now is any pressure. He's got enough problems to deal with after that Lester sess. Those anxiety attacks have been getting worse. His hand hit the intercom. "McCoy here. On my way, Captain."

Kirk snapped off the intercom and looked at Spock. "Now, Commander, I'd like to hear your opinion..."



"...so, that's it, Bones. The Klingons are up to something and the Federation has to know what. The T-17 lost their commanding officer in a freak accident and they need an immediate replacement. I'm the only one qualified who can take over on so short a notice. I've commanded that ship before - I know her and what she can do." He smiled slightly. "Don't look so glum, Doctor, it's not forever. I'll probably be gone only a month or so. By then the Klingons will have made their move - one way or the other."

McCoy was silent for a moment, then stood up and quietly paced the room. "Jim, for what it's worth, which isn't much, I'd advise against it. I'm talking both selfishly and as your doctor." He paused, looking at his youthful commander. "The crew of the T-17, in your own words, Jim, were led by an incompetent officer; and it was his own incompetence that led to his death. You said that the crew is composed of tough, experienced men; but they're demoralized, tired, possibly on the edge of mutiny. They've been under tremendous pressure and they're being sent back for more." He sat down again, his eyes flicking to Spock for moral support. The Vulcan was staring at his folded hands, and he found no comfort there. He saw none of the turmoil that caused Spock to avoid meeting his gaze. McCoy had not been witness to the argument that Spock had put forth before finally conceding the logic of

Kirk's reasoning.

Kirk interrupted his thoughts. "Go on, Bones, I'm waiting to hear the rest of your objections."

McCoy's eyes rested on Kirk. "All right. You've just been through an ordeal that would cripple most men. I think the T-17 will mean stress that you shouldn't try to handle right now. On the *Enterprise* you have friendship and support. Those attacks of anxiety you've been suffering since the transference aren't getting any better..."

Kirk broke in, "I know that, Bones, but it can't be helped. This is more important than one man. What I need to know is, will you pass me as physically fit to accept such a command?"

McCoy knew he was trapped. Kirk had requested and received a complete physical shortly after Janice Lester had been beamed down to the medical center on Starbase 4. Everything had checked out normally, both physically and mentally. But there were indications of a tremendous tension, an emotional struggle as Kirk attempted to come to grips with what had happened. "The tests say you're fit," McCoy said reluctantly.

Kirk's eyes softened. "And what does the 'country doctor' say? That's more important to me than tests. Is James Kirk capable of taking command stress?"

McCoy drew in a deep breath. "If I'm going to be honest, the answer is yes, you can command. You know that, Jim, without asking me. What scares me is that you'll be without emotional support at a time when you need it most. You'll survive, but will you survive as the same man?"

McCoy's blue eyes looked deep in Kirk's and the Captain found himself looking away. McCoy had asked a question that he couldn't answer. A few moments of silence passed, then Kirk reached toward the intercom, the light, bantering tone of his voice belied by the bleak look in his eyes. "Guess I'd better let Staunton know he hasn't lost his touch as a recruiting officer."



The *Enterprise* was in orbit around Starbase 4. Spock stood quietly just inside the door of the Captain's quarters, watching Kirk pack, his dark eyes never leaving the constantly moving figure of his Captain. Finally Kirk snapped his suitcase shut and looked around. He could see nothing he might have forgotten. Then his eyes met Spock's and the two of them stood in silence, sharing a long, lingering look which each knew could possibly be their last. The mission of the T-17 was extremely dangerous, and although no ship would have a better chance of survival, the odds were still high against success.

A ghost of a smile touched Kirk's lips, but didn't reach his eyes which were suddenly clearly reflecting the lonely man inside. "Don't worry about me, Spock. I'm sure I'll find enough to keep myself occupied. And I'm getting better with the mind control techniques you showed me - I can blank it all out most of the time."

"You still find sleep difficult, Jim; memories always return in the silence of the night. You will need rest. You must be alert now in a way you've never been required to be before. Not only do you have the Klingons to be concerned about, but also your own crew. Mental fatigue will only make coping with the problems that much more difficult."

"Yes; well, Bones gave me something to help cope with those difficulties." He studied Spock's face for one more moment, then glanced at the chronometer. "I better get out of here or I'm going to be taken out of orbit as a stowaway!"

They walked to the transporter room together, each lost in his own thoughts, saying little to the other. McCoy met them there, trying hard to conceal his worry. Scotty stood silently behind the transporter console, having assigned himself the task of beaming down the captain.

Kirk mounted the platform and turned to look at his friends. He felt his heart tug as he saw their expressions; he knew what he was feeling and could guess at what they felt. They had seen him loyally through one of the worst crises of his life - they had put their own lives on the line for him. How could anyone expect or deserve that much loyalty?

He swallowed, then smiled slightly. "Look after the *Enterprise*, gentlemen, until we meet again." He didn't trust himself to speak further, nor to keep looking at them. He focused his attention on the door and made his voice firm as he gave the command, "Energize!"

The three stood there until the gold sparkle had completely faded, then Spock broke the silence. "Gentlemen, I suggest we go to our stations. We are due to leave orbit in five minutes." He received no answer, nor did he expect one, simply turning to lead the way out of the transporter room. Now all they could do was wait to hear what fate was in store for their captain.



The next few days were busy ones for Kirk. He had to reacquaint himself with a vessel he had commanded only briefly five years before. Endless briefings and study filled his waking hours and he fell exhausted into bed each

night; but the dark did not bring blessed sleep, only haunting memories and restless dreams. When he woke in the dark now, there was no one sitting beside the bed to offer comfort.

The T-17 finally arrived in orbit and Kirk met the men with whom he would be working until the Klingons showed their hand. He arrived in the small briefing room adjacent to Admiral Staunton's office only to find the officers of the T-17 already settled in their places.

There was a long, mutual survey. The men of the T-17 saw a man, younger than any of them, standing with an air of quiet confidence and authority that couldn't be missed. Still, he was going to have to prove himself. They had all heard of James T. Kirk - everyone in Starfleet had heard of him and his exploits - but to these men he was just another figure of nebulous authority and they had had enough of that to last a lifetime.

Kirk, in turn, was studying them. Commander Thomas Weldon, First Officer, weapons expert. In his mid-forties, he had been a member of the elite forces for fifteen years. He was huskily built, muscles well-balanced over a stocky frame, his thick red hair beginning to grey. He had a quick mind and an ability to size up situations almost before they happened. Because of this, he had sensed trouble where his former captain, Larry Watson, had not. For that, he had been relieved of duty for openly defying a direct order, the result of which had almost cost the lives of the entire crew, and had led to Watson's death.

Lt. Commander Stan Crowell, chief engineer and general handyman. Crowell was in his late fifties and had often tried to retire from active duty, only to be pressed back into service. He had a unique ability to manufacture any necessary machinery from whatever was available; and to instantly survey any alien weapon or ship and be able to tell how it worked, what made it run, and to get it functioning. He had been a junior technician, learning his trade in the battles before Axanar; there was no way to replace his valuable experience. Now he was tired of the whole thing and wanted out, especially after the disasters of the past several months. Once again, Staunton had talked him into staying.

The third man was Commander Bret Maclean, communications wizard. Here was the lifeline of the ship. It was this man who followed the Klingon communiques and decoded them. It was this man who kept the Federation informed about what was going on. It was Maclean who said where the T-17 must go in order to find her vital information. This had been his function for the past seven months. Looking at him, Kirk could see that the strain was telling on him. His dossier said he was forty - he looked fifty, hair prematurely grey, a worn, haggard face that under other circumstances would have been considered handsome. He looked at Kirk without enthusiasm, then away, as if the man in front of him was not worth the bother. Kirk felt a moment of anger at this deliberate slight to a superior officer, but he fought it down. After what these men had been through, it was no wonder that anyone in authority left them cold. He moved forward and sat at the head of the table, Staunton at his left. Staunton introduced him to the others and Kirk noted the cool reception accorded him.

The reserve, however, didn't interfere with the business at hand, and they got through their agenda quickly and efficiently. The officers of the T-17 were impressed, despite their unwillingness to be, at the depth of Kirk's knowledge about their ship and its function. He did not ask any unnecessary questions, nor were the ones he did ask intended in any way to show off. They were all probing questions that required a detailed explanation of subjects which a commanding officer would not be expected to know first hand.

Finally everything had been covered. A relaxed silence settled over the room. "Well, gentlemen," Staunton said, "I think that about covers everything. I wish you luck; no use my saying how important the success of this mission is. You already know that, so I won't delay you getting on with your work." They all rose together. Weldon, Crowell, and Maclean returned immediately to the T-17.

Kirk collected his belongings from his temporary quarters and beamed up a short time later. Unlike the usual ceremonies accorded a new captain, Kirk discovered only First Officer Weldon present - no honor guard, no other senior officers. Weldon appeared to be waiting for him to comment on their absence and seemed to have a ready answer, so Kirk decided to ignore the snub. He picked up his suitcase and stepped down from the transporter platform. "Mr. Weldon," he acknowledged, "I trust I'm not interrupting anything."

A look of irritation crossed the first officer's face as a golden opportunity of putting this new captain in his place went by the board. "No," he said, "nothing important."

Kirk noted that the 'sir' was missing from the reply, but let that pass as well. "Good. Then I'll take this stuff to my quarters and I'd appreciate it if you'd tour the ship with me in half an hour, since you aren't doing anything important." Kirk smiled to himself as he saw Weldon's frustration at being caught in a trap of his own making. Being seen throughout the ship beside Kirk would make it seem, outwardly at least, that the new captain had Weldon's support. And he couldn't refuse to take the tour without being outright insubordinate; Kirk was correct in his guess that Weldon would not let himself sink that low.



Kirk had just finished unpacking when the door buzzer sounded. He pressed the lock release and Weldon walked into the room. The first officer noted that unlike the T-17's former commander, Kirk didn't surround himself with luxuries. There were some books on the stand above the bed, but that was all. Kirk was aware of the appraisal of his room and wondered what Weldon was looking for, or at. He himself took a quick glance, but saw nothing out of place that might cause talk. Well, he had to tour the ship and he had to drag this reluctant man with him - they might as well get on with it.

The tour took longer than either of them had expected. Kirk spent a long time in Engineering, getting reacquainted with the engines and their backup systems. He treated Crowell the same as he treated Scotty - with respect for the man and his abilities. He acknowledged, as few commanding officers did, that this was a job of tremendous importance. Like Weldon, Crosell tried to shrug him off, but Kirk so obviously knew what he was talking about that the engineer found himself warming to the task of explaining the systems. He discovered he only had to explain once - Kirk grasped each section fully and remembered what he was told.

The weapons control room was larger than on most ships and contained the newest and most sophisticated equipment. Kirk had kept himself up to date with all new weaponry, so it was all known to him. The weapons officer had to scramble a bit to keep up with answering Kirk's questions, and Weldon found himself rather enjoying the man's struggles. By the time they left there, Kirk was completely familiar with the location of all weapons control and was satisfied that in an emergency he could be helpful - not just in the way.

They poked their noses into Sickbay long enough to meet Peter Roget. Roget was the youngest member of the crew and a brilliant scientist and surgeon. He had landed this assignment almost by accident, coming aboard at the same time as Captain Watson. That was his first deep space flight and he had decided after a couple of weeks that he disliked military life, Starfleet, his shipmates, and medicine in general. He was a couple of years older than Kirk, mild-mannered, and totally imperturbable. The worse the situation, the calmer he became. He gave Kirk a penetrating glance as Weldon introduced them, instantly noting the signs of strain. He had bone up on Kirk's history, both professional and medical, so that he would be familiar with any problems that came up. There was obviously something deeply-rooted causing this inner tension, something that wasn't in the medical records. Roget found his inquisitive mind coming to the fore - it would be interesting to probe into this man, to find out what inner drive had brought him to the position he was now in - a "legend" in Starfleet.

Kirk was aware of none of this. He gave a friendly greeting and was happy to be answered like a human being instead of some strange alien fungus to be avoided. Maybe there was hope that someone on this ship would speak to him outside of sheer necessity!

Their last stop was the bridge. Here nothing had changed from five years ago. Although it was smaller and contained no science section, otherwise it was set up in a similar fashion to the bridge of the Enterprise, so Kirk felt quite at home. Weldon introduced him to the bridge personnel. Their greeting to a man was cold, almost sullen. Kirk felt a depression settling in. He had really let himself in for this one. He also felt his temper rising, but refused to give into it. A flash of temperament was the last thing these men needed now. If he remained patient he would get through - somehow. But he would tackle the problem tomorrow. Right now he looked forward to dinner and bed.



Kirk picked up his meal tray from the processor and chose a small, empty table. He was aware of the eyes following his movement, but paid no attention. He had a lot to think about and didn't mind the solitary treatment. After a few minutes the general conversation picked up again.

No one made any attempt to join him. He watched various crewmen come and go, noting their deliberate snubbing. He thought wistfully of the *Enterprise* and the easy familiarity that marked the crew's relations there. It had been a long time since he received the cold shoulder.

He finished dinner and put his tray down the chute. He paused in the doorway to avoid being run into by some junior officers. They made no effort to apologise, just looked at him and walked on. Kirk watched them for a moment, then went on his way, knowing that he could not allow that type of behavior for long. Not only was he going to lose his temper, but it would do his command image no good.

He went straight to his quarters, planning to go to bed early. He took a long, stinging shower under the sonics, letting the beams slowly relax the overtense muscles in his neck and shoulders. He pulled on his robe and started pacing around the small room, trying to concentrate on the mind-controls that Spock had taught him. The memories, the feelings that crowded in on him at quiet times were pressing down now, Janice Lester filling his mind.

Desperately he sat at the desk fighting the images. Then he saw the small recorder lying there, the one he had discovered among his belongings. Spock must have slipped it into his suitcase while he was packing. Checking it, he saw that it had not been used. He toyed with it for a moment, a thought forming in his mind. Except for the

past few days, he had not been alone since the exchange with Janice Lester. Spock had been with him day and night. When things had become too much to handle, Spock was there to listen, usually silent, knowing that there was little he could do but offer himself and whatever understanding he could. Okay Spock, Kirk thought, I still need you - you knew that, but you knew I was needed here more. So, this machine will have to take your place...



Dr. Roget met Kirk on his way to breakfast and saw the lines of fatigue etched deeply around the younger man's eyes. However, Kirk seemed alert and greeted him pleasantly enough. They ordered their meals together, then Roget left to sit with some of the crew, leaving Kirk alone at the same small table.

Kirk was on the bridge in plenty of time for the warp out of orbit. He found the crew to be as efficient as their dossiers had stated. They knew their jobs and went about them in a quiet, competent manner. They did not talk to him, but seemed to follow his commands without too much resistance. Kirk hesitated to ignite a confrontation and gave in to them more than his command sense told him was wise.

The days passed; the snubs continued. Kirk tried to ignore them and keep hold of his rising anger. It became increasingly difficult.

Eight days after they left Starbase 4, Commander Weldon handed Kirk the information of the present location of the Klingon fleet. Kirk called for a systems check of the bridge, then gave a complicated pattern of instructions that would take them to the Klingons the quickest way. Lt. Harris, the navigator, used to Watson's haphazard directions, got lost about half-way through and muttered audibly: "Just keep it up, wonder-boy. I'll get there any bloody way I think best!"

The bridge fell silent as Kirk rose and moved over to face Harris. His eyes were glittering dangerously under narrowed brows and his face was flushed. Weldon glanced around the bridge, then back at Kirk. This was going to be interesting. The voice was deceptively mild, underscoring the anger that lay behind it. "Please repeat that, Lieutenant. I didn't hear you."

Harris looked up, started to speak, but faltered under the unblinking glare. "I...uh..."

"Repeat it!" The voice was deadly in its quietness. So Harris repeated it. Kirk's eyes never left the man's face, his expression didn't change. When Harris had finished, Kirk turned his attention to the others. His voice continued to be deadly quiet, but each word rang out clearly. "Gentlemen, I don't really care what you think about me, but I want one thing clear right now. I am in command and I expect you to remember that. I give orders once - I do not repeat myself. If I find it necessary to repeat myself, the man I am talking to will find himself looking for another job under less than advantageous circumstances. I do not need to tell you about the importance of this mission nor the dangers of dissension among the crew. We don't need to like each other, but we do need to work together. You have the right to question my orders only when you believe they are flagrantly wrong." His eyes roved over the silent figures, then he turned to Lt. Harris. "Do I need to repeat myself, Mr. Harris?"

Harris stared at his hands and said nothing.

"Do I repeat myself, Mr. Harris, or do I get a new navigator?"

Harris looked up, his eyes smouldering. "No, sir, you don't have to repeat your order."

Something changed on Kirk's face. "Good," he said. "Mr. Weldon, you have the con. I'll be in my quarters if I'm needed."

Kirk left them to hash out what had happened. He hoped that his meaning had been clear or that scene would have to be repeated many times in the next few days. Arriving in his cabin, he moved to the small recorder and began talking in a low voice.



He returned to the bridge several hours later and walked into total silence. He looked around, but no one would meet his gaze. He moved to the command chair that Weldon had vacated. No word passed between them as Weldon moved to his own station - no report, no comment on their position, nothing. Well, Kirk thought, looks like we do it the hard way. He sat down and started through the check list. "Helm - speed?"

"Warp 4, as ordered." The man did not look up, nor did he add the military requirement for addressing a commanding officer.

Kirk settled in for the fight. "Warp 4, what, Helm?" He saw Lt. Duncan stiffen and saw Harris glance over at him. The silence lengthened. "Mr. Duncan, I asked a question. Do I repeat myself?"

The sandy-haired man spun in his seat to face Kirk. He was reputed to have a violent temper and his temper was rising now. As he met Kirk's gaze, he hesitated. There was no anger in the hazel eyes which met his, only determination and behind that, Duncan suspected, an iron will. He glanced quickly at Weldon - he knew what the first officer had said about Kirk, that he just might be a man they could follow, but he hadn't believed it. Kirk saw Duncan's eyes flicker, but didn't take his gaze from the navigator. He waited in silence. Duncan's eyes met

his again briefly, then he swung back to his console and his answer came, quiet with a steely anger, but it came. "Warp 4, as ordered...sir."

Kirk was conscious that all eyes were upon him and he didn't let his expression change. He went through all the stations and obtained their reports; some were sullen, some quiet, some angry, but they all answered in precise military terms.

When their duty watch ended, they left in silence. Kirk watched them go. He felt no triumph, just a hollowness. He had won one small hurdle - how many more were going to come? He ran his hands across his face - he was so tired he just wanted to crawl into a hole. His thoughts were interrupted by the new shift coming on duty. They were obviously aware of what had happened and were giving him searching looks. He didn't want another confrontation now, so he just greeted them and left the bridge.

He was idly stirring his soup when a tray was placed on the table. He looked up to see Peter Roget standing there. "Mind if I join you?"

Kirk half-smiled. "Sure you want to be seen with me? Your reputation might suffer."

"Cap, I'm probably as much of an outsider here as you are, but they don't depend on me for anything more serious than vitamin shots, so they let me tag along. Besides, I heard about what happened on the bridge earlier - my medical books call that stress. As your medical officer I have to keep an eye on your condition. So, here's my eye..." Sitting across from Kirk, he added, "...how's your condition?"

Kirk shrugged. "Unbloodied, at the moment."

Roget grinned. "Good. That makes my job easier." The rest of the meal passed pleasantly enough. Kirk and Roget both steered away from serious topics and they were ignored by the other crewmembers.

Kirk had finished his meal and was idly fiddling with a spoon when suddenly a look of great pain crossed his face and his hand clenched so tightly that he bent the spoon almost double. Roget stared at him for a moment, then stood, reaching over to shake Kirk's shoulder. "Cap, hey, Cap, snap out of it!"

Kirk's eyes cleared and he looked numbly up at Roget, then down at the spoon in his hand. Carefully he put it back on the tray. Silently he stood and picked up the tray, sending it down the chute with a vicious push, and walked out of the room. Roget hurried along behind, not knowing what was going on, but not about to leave Kirk alone until he found out.

He followed Kirk into his quarters. He either wasn't noticed or Kirk didn't care. He watched as the captain took a small tablet from a container and downed it. Roget reached out and took the container. The contents were clearly labeled. Roget's eyebrows rose. He looked up to see Kirk staring at him and he quietly handed the container back. It was received without comment. "Cap, that's a mighty powerful anti-depressant. Not at all what I would normally expect a 'legendary' Starfleet captain to be inhaling." His eyes searched Kirk's face. "Those little babies are hard to get - someone in authority does that prescribing and that someone managed to do it and sneak it past your medical records. Must be pretty high up for that..."

Kirk's face was beginning to clear and a slightly amused expression was taking the place of the bleakness. "Lt. Commander, to be exact."

"Uh...Lt. Commander. Yeah, he could probably get them..."

"Backed up by an admiral."

Roget's face was beginning to look comical. "Uh...admiral. In other words, don't check into it, because I'm not going to find out anything..."

Kirk nodded, but said nothing.

"Well, if an admiral says you're fit to command, I guess a Lieutenant doesn't have much authority to place an objection."

Kirk turned and put the pills down. "Dr. Roget," he said, not turning around, "I appreciate your concern and I wish I could explain things to your satisfaction..." He hesitated for a moment, then turned around, his face open and honest, "...but I can't. It's a situation that I can't even explain to myself, something that happened..."

Roget could see the hurt as Kirk struggled to explain, and interrupted. "Ah, Cap, don't bother trying. No one on this ship ever explains anything to me. They just tell me what to do. Let's leave it like that, okay? You've got your condition; I've got my eye. Between the two of us, that ought to be enough to keep you going."

"Thanks..."

"Forget it. Well, I guess I'd better say goodnight. Big day tomorrow with the Klingons..." With that he was gone out the door.

Kirk stood for a few moments looking at the empty space where Roget had been standing, then sighed to himself and turned toward the bed. He should record a message for Spock, but he was too tired. He would rest for just a few minutes, then do it. Within a few minutes, he was dead in sleep, fully clothed.

And while Jim Kirk slept, Peter Roget pondered this new problem. Kirk seemed the answer to all the dissension on the T-17. He could already see a difference in the attitudes among the bridge crew; but this man had some deeply hidden secret, something that Starfleet felt needed to be kept classified. Obviously they trusted that Kirk could handle whatever this problem was. He found himself wishing there was something he could do to help, but Kirk had warned him off and he would respect that warning. Still, he would keep his eye on Kirk as he had promised and if the man had to turn to someone, Roget would make sure there was someone to turn to.



The next day the most important man on the ship became Bret Maclean, Communications Officer. They were within sensor range of the Empire warships. It was Maclean's job to get a steady stream of messages from the T-17 to Starfleet by means of relay ships stationed for that purpose. He was also in constant communication with Kirk. Since their ship had joined the large gathering, there would be communication with the Klingons as well. It was up to Kirk to decide what those communications would be, and it was up to Maclean to relay them in Klingonese. Fortunately, scout ships did not possess adequate visual equipment, for it would have been tricky indeed trying to explain what the Federation was doing in the middle of a Klingon invasion force.

Kirk discovered that Maclean was a tireless worker, fluent in both English and Klingonese, and had no trouble switching from one language to the other. For as long as this situation endured, Maclean would get very little rest. He had a substitute, but he rarely left his station for longer than a half hour, to catch short snatches of sleep before taking charge again. And wherever he was, Kirk had an open line directly to him. For better or for worse, they had to work together. Kirk would not threaten here, and Maclean was too busy to worry about anything but the open channels in front of him.



The crew settled down to what they knew best - danger. Work was done efficiently, with little conversation. Too much depended on their actions - whatever conflicts they had were momentarily put aside. The top priority in everyone's mind was to get out of this mission in one piece. During this time, Kirk was everywhere. He did not wait for reports; he went to see what was happening. Crewmen who had not seen Watson in the seven months he commanded saw Kirk almost every time they turned around. Where an extra pair of hands was needed, he was there, helping, cajoling, offering advice, commanding a job well done. Eyebrows lifted as he left for another destination. Men found themselves trying harder because Kirk could do their job better. It started as a challenge; it ended as a desire to please.

Kirk was too busy to notice. He was deliberately knocking himself out, falling into bed too exhausted to think, not letting his mind drift to images he did not want to remember. He slept with the last of his words to Spock still on his lips. He must not let himself go now; there was so much at stake. Roget watched him, worried about him, but said nothing. Kirk was bringing the ship and the crew back to life, but he was killing himself doing it. There was a limit to human endurance - even a 'legend's'.

They had been hovering at the edge of the Klingon fleet for two nerve-wracking weeks. Few aboard had had much sleep; there was too much to do, too much unrelieved tension. Kirk had just collapsed on his bed for a few minutes when the door buzzer rang. It was unlocked and opened to reveal Maclean standing there, two steaming mugs in his hands. Kirk swung up in surprise. "Come in, Commander."

Maclean came in and headed for the one empty chair. He handed one of the mugs he was carrying to Kirk. "Only coffee," he said in an apologetic voice. "Don't know about you, but I can't keep my eyes open and I've got to make a report to a demanding superior officer who doesn't like to have to repeat anything."

Kirk grinned. "Don't worry about it. This superior officer will probably have to get you to repeat things more than once. But...thanks." He took a long swallow of the steaming black brew and instantly discovered that not only was the coffee very strong, it wasn't just coffee. But he couldn't argue with the effect it had almost instantly on his system. He looked into his mug - this brew most definitely had possibilities. "All right, Commander," he said a few moments later. "I think we're both somewhat revitalized. Let's have that report."

Maclean was a professional. The report he gave Kirk was factual and complete. There was no need to repeat anything; everything was far too clear the first time. Kirk put his mug down and got to his feet, pacing the small area between the desk and the door. Maclean didn't bother watching him; he was busy studying the bottom of his mug as though he would discover some deep, dark secret hidden there. "I don't believe they're stupid enough to try again..."

Kirk's voice brought Maclean back to the present. "Excuse me, Captain, I wasn't listening."

"I was talking about the Klingons..."

"Oh." Maclean looked up at Kirk. "I believe you've run into this type of situation before." He saw Kirk's look of surprise and smiled faintly. "Captain Kirk, there's very little that we don't know about you. Men who are

sent to die together don't have their files hidden from one another. You'd be surprised to know what your senior officers have found out about you..."

Kirk froze, fighting off the sudden images that he had held at bay successfully since that time, two weeks earlier, when he had exposed his inner anxieties in front of Roget. He struggled for control, managing to focus on the task at hand. "Guess that's only fair. Well, Commander, we'll tag along with the invasion force until we find out what Starfleet wants us to do. Where are we going, by the way?"

"Planet called Bealan. Weldon is computing data on it now. I've never heard of it myself."

Neither had Kirk, nor at the moment did he care. He thanked Maclean for the coffee and as soon as the communications officer left he grabbed for McCoy's pills.

He hadn't covered as well as he thought. Maclean bumped into Roget on his way back to the bridge. "Hey, Doc, I think maybe you should check up on Kirk. The strain seems to be catching up with him..."

Roget broke in hastily. "What happened?"

"Dunno. I was teasing him about what we had found out about him and he got the strangest look on his face. He sounded all right, but he sure looked funny."

"I'll check into it. Oh, Bret, keep this to yourself, okay?"

"Sure, Doc. Doesn't make any difference to me. Couple hours sleep cures anything; I've already discovered that."

Roget went straight to Kirk's quarters. He rang the buzzer and the door opened. Kirk was lying flat on his back on the bed, the heels of his hands digging into his eyes, a small tape recorder at his side. He didn't acknowledge Roget's presence. The doctor saw the pills on the desk. He moved quietly to Kirk and felt his pulse - it was racing. He shook Kirk by the shoulder. "Hey, Cap..."

"Go away. I want to be left alone!"

Roget winced at the pain in Kirk's voice, but forced himself to put anger into his response. "Sure you do, Captain; so do all of us. Nobody wants to be where we are now. But if you pull what Watson did, so help me, I'll mutiny right along side the others. Now pull yourself together."

He saw the anger in Kirk's eyes as he started to sit up, saw that the tone, if not his actual words, had penetrated. "I said get out!"

"No way, Captain. You're being irrational and I'm staying right here until I know if I can certify you unfit for command, or you tell me what's bugging you."

Kirk's blazing eyes met Roget's equally angry gaze. At that moment Kirk wanted to hurt, to shock this man standing over him. "All right, Doctor, I'll tell you what you want to know, what was left out of those precious files of yours. For two days I lived in the body of a woman - a woman I once loved. I was trapped in a body that was so different...no, not different, alien, from anything that I have ever experienced that..." His voice softened, but the emotion intensified and his eyes fixed on nothing. "I was weak, defenseless, alone - and terrified in the helplessness that that body forced on me. And the memories keep crushing back - the feeling of horror as I looked in that mirror and saw through my eyes, her face; felt with my hands, her body; heard with my ears, her voice..." His eyes cleared and he looked back at Roget, cold anger replacing the horror of his memories. "Standing in front of you now, Doctor, is a man who was a woman. Does it make you happier now that you know? The crew could have a good laugh - why don't you go and tell them. Might as well start a mutiny because of that as anything else..."

Roget flinched inwardly at the bitterness in Kirk's voice, the loathing that Kirk was flinging at himself, taunting himself for being less than he thought he should be, berating himself for what he considered to be a letdown from his own ideals of a commanding officer, for letting his feelings of anxiety get the better of him.

But none of that reached the surface. As Kirk spoke, he never took his eyes from Roget's face - and Roget's expression never changed. He might as well have been reading from a technical manual for all the effect it seemed to be having. When he finished, Roget started to turn toward the door. "Cap, I've got something better than those things your medical friend gave you. Just out, as a matter of fact, only available to special services. I'd like to put you on it - might help."

Kirk smiled grimly. "'Might help'. No other comment, Doctor? No gasping, no incredulous exclamations?"

Roget turned back and looked at him sympathetically. "Cap, the first time I saw you like this, you said it was something you wished you could explain to my satisfaction - you just did. And believe me, I'll never get any satisfaction out of repeating it..."

Kirk flushed a little, then met Roget's gaze head on. "Thanks."

"None necessary. Strain catches us all at times. Now, come with me and I'll see what I can do about fixing you up."



Kirk arrived on the bridge just as the ships started off. There were two battle cruisers, the Klingon flagship, and several small scout ships, the T-17 among them. He congratulated Maclean on managing to be included. "I'd rather you wait and thank me if we get out of this in one piece."

Kirk grinned and turned, almost banging into Weldon who was standing behind him. "Report on Bealan, Captain."

It was the first time that the first officer had used Kirk's title. He acknowledged it with his eyes. "Thank you, Commander." He took the report from Weldon and went over to the command chair. The report contained little that surprised him. Bealan was a heavily populated planet with a primitive culture, providing open season for Klingon invasion. He felt his anger rise exactly the way it had when he heard that Organia was threatened. He doubted if the Bealans would turn out to be an advanced society as the Organians had. Ayelborne had said that some day the Federation and the Klingons would be allies - Kirk knew he should wish it would happen, but he couldn't when so many innocent lives were at stake and the Klingons could kill them so unfeelingly. He could feel nothing but anger, and anger did not blend with friendship.

Maclean's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Captain, the flagship is hailing us."

Kirk could feel a knot tighten in his stomach. "Acknowledge it, Commander; find out what they want."

Maclean's quiet voice was the only sound on the bridge and everybody's attention was fully fixed on him. After a few seconds, he turned to Kirk. "Sir, we're ordered to go ahead of the Fleet and scout for Federation vessels."

Daarn, Kirk thought. Want to stay here, keep an eye on these ships...

"No go?" Maclean was looking at him. Kirk looked surprised - what did Maclean have in mind? He shook his head. Again the only voice was Maclean's, then he signed off and leaned back, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Kirk couldn't hold his curiosity. "What happened?"

Maclean grinned. "I just told them that we had been the advance ship for the last three missions and they could go stuff themselves if they thought we were about to do it again."

Kirk looked incredulous. "Commander, you've got a lot of nerve!"

He received a quiet chuckle, and Weldon answered. "Captain, that's mild compared to what he used to say to your predecessor. He's had a lot of practice."

This ship must have been a hardliner, Kirk thought. Aloud he said: "I gather that we accompany the rest of the Fleet?"

"That we do, Captain. We're to tag along behind the flagship in case she should need us."

"She'll need us, all right," said Weldon. "And she'll get an awful surprise when she calls."

"Well," said Kirk, getting to his feet, "I think everything should be fairly peaceful for the next couple of hours. I want everyone here off duty for at least an hour - get something to eat and some sleep - no arguments." Kirk stopped in Engineering to drag Crowell out. The engineer hadn't been to bed for two days, working on a cranky power system that was necessary to beam out Maclean's transmissions to Starfleet vessels without being detected by the Klingons.

The meal was silent; everyone was too tired to talk. Roget roamed the room checking on each man, giving a shot here, a quiet word of advice there. Kirk was sitting with Weldon and Crowell. He hadn't touched what was on his plate - he was too tired to care. Roget gave him a worried look and then another in the series of shots he'd started earlier. Kirk rubbed his arm ruefully and Roget grinned. "Humor me, Cap, this is the only action I get."

"Don't believe him," Crowell said. "He can patch and sew with the best of them."

Roget's eyebrows rose. "My, my, I didn't think anyone had noticed." He was on his way before anyone could comment further. Ten minutes later everyone was sacked out.



"Mr. Spock, there's a top priority message coming in from Starfleet."

"On audio, Lieutenant."

Uhura's fingers deftly moved across the communications console and the subdued voice of Admiral Staunton sounded. "Commander Spock, the Klingons have started their move. We have word that an invasion fleet is heading toward the unprotected planet of Bealan, a primitive world not under Federation protection, but within the Federation sphere of influence. You are ordered, along with the *Potemkin*, to prevent the invasion from taking place. We think this is a feeling out of our defenses, to see if we will react or sit back and try to avoid trouble. The T-17 is included in the invasion force..."

Spock's brow lifted, and although his expression didn't change, a sense of dread ran through him. The Klingons would like nothing better than to get their hands on Kirk, and Spock didn't dare to think of what might happen to the Captain should that occur. "Lt. Uhura, acknowledge the order. Mr. Chekov, plot a course to Bealan. Helm, Warp 6." Rising from the command chair, he continued, "Mr. Sulu, you have the con. I'll be in Sickbay if you need me."



Kirk woke up groggy, but feeling a bit better. He glanced at the chronometer and saw that he had been asleep for half an hour. He sat up, taking a minute to come fully awake before standing. He washed his face and headed off to the nearest coffee supply, arriving at the same moment as Maclean. "At least an hour's sleep, Captain?"

"Just following your lead, Commander. Any more of that coffee you fed me earlier?" he added hopefully.

Maclean grinned. "You liked that, did you? I suppose I could scrounge some more up from somewhere." He disappeared for a few moments, then arrived back, carrying a small green bottle. "Available only on the Martian colonies, and the greatest pick-me-up I've ever discovered." He poured a few drops in Kirk's mug. "It also makes the stuff they call coffee on this ship bearable - frankly, I think it's strong enough to blast out a man's innards, but most of the men seem to prefer it like that." He took a long swallow and grimaced. Then he looked at Kirk. "Got a message from Starfleet. The *Potemkin* and the *Enterprise* are on their way to intercept us. Might be a dilly battle..."

"The *Enterprise*?" interrupted Kirk. "Are you sure?"

"Uh huh, I'm sure." His expression softened. "That's your ship, isn't it, Captain?"

Kirk nodded. "I hadn't figured they'd be involved."

"Maybe Starfleet felt they would have a more efficient fighting force if they had both your ships together."

"Both?" said Kirk with an amused smile. "More likely they thought this crew would have me strung up by the thumbs by now."

"Not likely," replied Maclean. "They put you here for a reason. If you've inspired half the confidence on the *Enterprise* that you have here, they know what they have to work with."

Kirk looked at him, surprise slowly crossing his face.

"Well, guess I'd better get back on duty." With that, Maclean got up and left, nearly bumping into Roget as they met in the doorway.

"That's an interesting expression, Cap. Don't often see a commanding officer sitting by himself looking stunned."

Kirk grinned sheepishly. "No, I suppose not. How's everyone holding out?"

Roget sobered a bit. "General exhaustion, nerves ready to snap, efficiency rating excellent. Odd combination, but the worse things get, the better this crew functions." He looked wistful. "I hope this ends soon. The men need out; they need to sit on green grass by a babbling brook and think of nothing more serious than turning pages in a book. You all right?"

"Me? Yes. I think so. Those shots seem to be helping."

"Good. I'll be around in a couple of hours to give you another. See you then."

The bridge was humming with quiet efficiency when Kirk arrived. The screens showed the Klingon flagship slightly ahead of them. Kirk stood looking at it for a long while, the image of the men it carried in his mind. Maclean's voice interrupted him. "We arrive at Bealan in five hours, Captain."

Kirk acknowledged and slowly sat down. Five hours. And somewhere they would meet the *Enterprise*. If anything happened to her, while he was here unable to help, he didn't know if he could take it.



Spock and McCoy arrived on the bridge together. McCoy was more worried than ever about Kirk. Starfleet had sent them no more reports about the T-17, but had kept up steady information about the Klingon fleet and where they were. That information could only have come from the Federation spy ship. The T-17 had been in the Klingon space for three weeks now and her reports had been coming in continuously. Three weeks of wire-taut nerves, a crew that was difficult, and a Captain who had started with a problem no commander should ever have to face. How was he holding out? Knowing Kirk, he was managing, but as each day passed, McCoy grew more concerned..

Spock turned from the computer station. "It will take precisely 12.173 hours to get to Bealan. The *Potemkin* will be at least two hours behind us. There is a strong possibility we will arrive too late to give any assistance to the Captain..."

"And," broke in McCoy glumly, "since you don't believe in luck, you're ready for the worst..."

Spock looked at him, but didn't comment, thus confirming McCoy's statement. Then, turning toward the command chair, he said, "Mr. Sulu, I want you to conduct drills for battle readiness. I want the *Enterprise* working at peak efficiency when we get to Bealan."

"Aye, sir."

McCoy sighed to himself. For him it would be a matter of waiting. Almost everyone else would be busy participating in the drills. For the medical department it was the most nerve-wracking time, sitting around waiting for the casualties.



Roget met Kirk as he left the weapons control room. If anything, Kirk looked more tired. Roget couldn't condemn him for the way he was running the ship, but he couldn't let Kirk fall apart. The ship could function without a captain; the crew had proved that with Watson, but they had come to depend on Kirk in a way Roget would have thought impossible. His spirit and determination had pervaded every corner of the ship and if that spirit was taken away, morale would deflate like a balloon. "Got a minute, Cap?"

Kirk looked at him questioningly. "A minute..."

"Let's get some coffee."

Kirk almost groaned. He didn't think he could stand another cup of coffee, but it was tempting to sit down. He contacted Maclean to say that he was heading for Sickbay and could be reached there if necessary. He got a cheery response about shirking his duty, followed by a chuckle. Kirk grinned to himself and followed Roget down the corridor. When they reached Sickbay, Kirk flopped down in one of the chairs and shut his eyes, luxuriating in a moment of peace. Then he straightened and looked at Roget. "All right, Doctor, you got me here. What do you want to say?"

"That obvious, huh?"

"Not really. I'm just used to the medical mind and it tends to be transparent. None of you seem to be very good at lying or deceit."

"Cap, you're pushing yourself too hard."

"No harder than anyone else."

"Perhaps not - but none of them started out with your problems. Also, if you go, this crew folds."

Kirk leaned back in the chair, his expression growing more serious. "They managed for five years without me - they managed for seven months with Larry Watson..."

"And you've shown them what it means to have a leader. Cap, these men are running on nerves alone. There's not a man on board who I wouldn't cheerfully write up as unfit for duty. And I put you at the top of the list - and don't look at me like that; you know better than I do how you feel, and I've got a good enough idea. You're at the point where you don't want to eat and you're too tired to sleep. And you're scared to let yourself relax because of what happened on Camus II..."

Kirk interrupted him. "I appreciate your concern, but either have this conversation lead someplace, or I've got to get going."

Roget knew he had been warned off private ground, so he looked at Kirk, an open appeal shining from his eyes. "Please, slow down. Don't try to be everywhere, doing everything. Hold together - for the sake of the crew, if not for yourself."

Kirk felt the other man's honest concern, but he couldn't give in to it. "Roget, I can't ask any man to do something I wouldn't. I'm not the type of commander who can just sit back and give orders. I've been told that's a weakness. Maybe it is; I don't know. But I can't change, especially now. I'm sorry."

Roget nodded, having expected that kind of answer. "Well, didn't think it would work, but it was worth a try, and I did manage to keep you off your feet for a few minutes..."

"For which I'm grateful," said Kirk with a grin.

"I promise not to bring the subject up again. Now, hold still for a shot and I'll let you be on your way."

Things were quiet when Kirk got back to the bridge. Weldon was checking a course change with Harris and Maclean was sitting with his head in his hands, eyes closed, deep lines of exhaustion marking his face. Kirk moved over to him. "You all right?"

A lop-sided grin met his question. "Fine, Caotain. Just got a message for you from the *Enterprise*. A Lt. Commander Scott has managed to coax Warp 8 from his engines. They should only be a couple of hours behind us. Sounds like someone old Crowell should know."

"They'd have a lot in common, Commander. Well, that leaves us with a few hours to fill between the time we get to Bealan and the time help arrives. Mr. Weldon, how long before we get there ourselves?"

"Should be a couple more hours, sir, if we keep this speed."

"Good. Gentlemen, I think it's time for a meeting of the minds - maybe all the tired brains together can come up with some concrete ideas on how to stop the Klingons until the *Enterprise* arrives. We'll meet in the Sickbay in half an hour. Wrack your brains, everyone. Our decisions have to be the right ones!"

A half hour later they were gathered together and Roget decided that he hadn't seen such a depleted looking group of men anywhere in his life. But not one of them was about to give up. They had their job and they were going to see it through to the end, led by one of the most obstinate people Roget had ever met.

Kirk had thrown the meeting open. He had a few ideas, but none of them seemed very promising. Maybe somebody else would come up with something. Crowell was the first to speak. "Captain, I've been experimenting with a little

gadget that might jam their transporters. Don't know how long I could keep it up, but it might delay their beardown by an hour or so. More than that could start fouling up our engine efficiency."

The look on Kirk's face was all the thanks that Crowell needed. "That's a start, Mr. Crowell; it should get us almost to the time the *Enterprise* is due to arrive. Get to work. We'll think of something else to do after that, if it's needed."

Crowell quickly departed. Kirk looked around at the others. "Anyone else have any suggestions?"

A few ideas were tossed back and forth, but nothing concrete came out of it. Finally Weldon voiced the opinion that Kirk had already formulated. "If the *Enterprise* is late getting here, the only real alternative we have is a full-scale assault, starting with an all-out attack on the flagship. We're fast, our weaponry is one of our strengths, and there's always luck..."

Luck, thought Kirk. *Random chance, Spock would call it...it's happened before, but it's not something to count on...* Aloud he said: "I agree - we may have to blast our way through the fleet. Weldon, you and I better get to weapons control and formulate a plan - one or the other of us must be prepared to ~~ban~~ that station from now on. Maclean, try to find out how long until the *Enterprise* gets here, and advise them of our problem and possible actions. Roget, the crew needs to be alert now more than ever. Do you have something that can help keep them going? We only need a couple more hours..."

"Cap, more drugs are going to..." But he couldn't say it, not with the plea on Kirk's face. "All right," he muttered, "I've probably got something stashed away." He went off to search through his drug supply.

Kirk hit the intercom in front of him. He knew that twenty men would be hanging on his next words and he had absolutely no hope to give them - all he could tell them was the truth. "Captain to crew..." How often had he said that aboard the *Enterprise* when they so desperately needed a word of strength and encouragement? He quickly blocked those thoughts. "...we are going to try to stall the Klingons by jamming their transporters. There is a possibility that help from Starfleet will arrive in that time. If not, we'll have to go in fighting - we may have to trade our twenty-one lives for the life and future life on Bealan..." His voice softened. "...it's a small price to pay for freedom. All personnel...~~ban~~ your posts. Captain out."

Those listening did not need to see Kirk's face to know the pain those words cost him - to tell men that he might have to lead them to their deaths. Weldon found he couldn't look Kirk straight in the face. He stood and put his hand on Kirk's shoulder, trying in the gesture to say what he felt. Kirk stood slowly. "Come on, Commander, let's get to weapons control and hope we don't have to use it."

True to Weldon's prediction, in two hours Bealan came into view, a blue-green globe against the blackness of space. Kirk was on the bridge as the fleet moved into orbit around the planet. At his orders, the T-17 fell back a little from the main group so there would be more maneuverability if a fight was upcoming.

Maclean kept up a steady report of the Klingon preparations, and at the appropriate time, Crowell jammed their transporters. It worked perfectly and caused both massive chaos and temper tantrums aboard the other vessels. Kirk had to chuckle at Maclean's aggrieved accusations - he did not understand Klingonese, but it didn't take much of an imagination to know what Maclean was saying. Occasionally the communications officer would have to break transmission because he couldn't hold his laughter. It was the best tension reliever there could have been.

Roget arrived on the bridge, looking as disapproving as McCoy about all the chemicals he was pumping into everybody. As he received his shot, Kirk turned toward communications. "Maclean, any word from the *Enterprise*?"

"No, sir. I think our relay ships must be getting out of the way. I can't seem to get anything at all from Starfleet."

Kirk glanced at the chronometer. Thirty-five minutes and Crowell would be forced to stop the jamming device. How long till help arrived? He ran his hand over his face, trying not to watch as the seconds ticked by.



Mr. Chekov, how long until we rendezvous with the Klingons?"

"Fifty minutes, Mr. Spock, providing we can keep up Warp 8."

"We'll keep it up, Mr. Spock," said Scotty grimly.

Spock acknowledged Scott with his eyes, then turned to Uhura. "Any further word from the captain, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. Starfleet has ordered the relay ships out of the danger zone, so we have no communication with the T-17..." She stopped as Spock turned away. The feeling of dread was returning in the pit of his stomach - he knew there was little Kirk would not do to prevent the Klingons from attacking Bealan. And there was a good possibility that he would be too late to help his captain.

"Put the ship on yellow alert, Mr. Sulu. All hands to battle stations. We're going in ready for action."

"Aye, sir. All hands, we are on yellow alert. Go to battle stations. All hands, battle stations - maintain battle readiness."

And wait, thought Spock. That's all we can do now.



Kirk left the command chair and moved to the weapons control station to the left of Maclean. They had five minutes left before Crowell would have to deactivate the jammer. Nothing showed on the sensors; the Enterprise was still out of range - they couldn't send any communications to her, because she didn't have the special equipment necessary to hide the transmission from the Klingons. Kirk pushed down the intercom. "This is the Captain - all hands to battle stations. We've got a fight on our hands, gentlemen, one that we must win. Keep your wits about you. We've got surprise on our side - and quicker movement. Let's hope it's enough. Kirk out."

Crowell called a few minutes later. "I've done all I can, Captain. If you want to keep the engines strong enough for screens and maneuvering, I've got to turn this equipment off now."

"Go ahead," Kirk said, "and thanks."

"You're welcome, sir, just wish it could have been more. We're ready down here any time you are."

"Thanks, we'll give you plenty of warning. Kirk out." He contacted Weldon. "Ready, Commander? Things are apt to get a bit hectic in a few minutes."

"Ready down here, sir. Anytime you say."

Kirk turned to look at the viewscreen. Maclean watched him for a few seconds, then said, "Captain, this crew had a habit of surviving..."

Kirk smiled slightly and nodded. "I'll keep that in mind." He noticed Roget standing quietly by the turbolift doors, looking as glum as Kirk had ever seen him. "Cheer up, Doc," he said, "it'll be over before you know it."

"That's what I'm afraid of," muttered Roget under his breath.



"How much longer, Spock?" asked McCoy, desperately fighting the frustration that was building.

"Thirteen minutes, Doctor. We have them on our sensors now. We should be in time."

"Mr. Spock!" broke in Chekov, "something's happening with the Klingon fleet - a ship has started an attack! Sir," he said, turning toward the concerned faces behind him, "Captain Kirk must have attacked with the T-17!"

McCoy clutched Spock's arm. "Spock, can we get there in time now?"

"I don't know, Doctor. I honestly don't know..."



The T-17 had started her attack well. She had gone straight for the flagship and by calculated luck had disabled her almost immediately. But precious seconds were lost as they made certain that they had done sufficient damage. One of the battle cruisers had an alert crew, and the T-17 was dealt some staggering blasts before she could get out of the way. "Shields weak, but holding, Captain."

"Good. Course 116 mark 4, Warp 2. Get around to the other side, Helm."

"Aye, sir." The little ship skipped around to the back of the battle cruisers. They got a direct hit from one of the scout ships. Weldon blasted it wide open.

"Two down," Maclean muttered to himself. They hit the second battle cruiser twice before scooting to the left and under the crippled flagship.

"Helm, try to keep the flagship between us and the rest. We need a bit more protection."

"I'll try, sir." A tremendous blast hit the small ship, knocking everyone off their feet.

"What the hell happened?" came Weldon's demanding voice over the intercom a few seconds later. "My screen's blank down here."

Kirk picked himself up off the floor; his left arm felt numb and useless and his vision was swimming from a crack on his head. Maclean was fighting a shower of sparks coming from the console in front of him. "Get out of there, you idiot!" Roget had moved quickly and pulled Maclean out of the way just before the panel went up in flames. Kirk grabbed an extinguisher and had the blaze out in a few seconds. Roget was treating burns on Maclean's hands.

"Useless now," Kirk said grimly, looking at the communications panel.

Weldon's voice came again. "Hey, will you loafers get with it and tell me what happened?"

Kirk looked around. "Anyone know?"

"The flagship just blew up, sir. I think one of the cruisers tried a fancy shot at us and they were in the way."

"Thank you," said Weldon sardonically.

"Trouble is," said Kirk, "we've lost almost all power in the shields. Helm, hard over..." He was momentarily distracted by Roget ripping the shirt sleeve off his uniform. Looking down, he saw his arm was covered with blood.

"Don't pay any attention to me, Cap. I'm quiet, mobile, and can easily treat on the run. Still seeing

double?"

"Just a little fuzzy. Weldon, get ready. It's three against one and they're all after us. We'll throw everything we have at them and hope it's enough." He looked over at Maclean and was grateful for the support in his eyes. "This is it, gentlemen. There's nowhere to run. Helm - dead ahead. All right, Weldon, fire!"

The little ship fought forward, weapons blazing, rocking from the shocks of the Klingon hits. The shields were gradually failing, but she was causing as much damage as she was receiving. But she could only take so much - the shields finally gave and the bridge exploded in a tremendous glare of heat and light.



"There they are, Mr. Spock!" Sulu voiced what they all saw - two battle cruisers and a scout ship slowly backing off from a small floating hulk. The battered ship looked dead.

"Lt. Uhura, warn them off. Red alert. Phasers and photon torpedoes ready."

"All weapons ready, sir."

The bridge of the *Enterprise* was deathly quiet except for Uhura's voice. There was no verbal acknowledgement of their warning. The Klingon ships sat still in space for only a few moments, then they turned on the *Enterprise*, obviously buoyed by their victory over the smaller ship.

But they made a deadly mistake. They met a ship that was running high on tension and anger. Even Spock had only one thought in his mind. The battle was short and vicious. The *Enterprise* was damaged by repeated hits, but the Klingons were completely destroyed. Spock had a momentary thought that he might have to defend the viciousness of his attack, but one look at the small, helpless ship floating beyond the debris left from the Klingon ships forced any doubt from his mind. They had paid for what they had done.



A small boarding party materialized aboard the T-17. The ship was full of smoke, debris, and growing radiation. Scotty headed for Engineering. Crowell was there with what men he had who had survived, fighting to control the fire that was threatening to overtake the engine room. Scotty called back to the *Enterprise* for more men and equipment - with the extra help they soon had the fire out.

Communications were out shipwide. Spock and McCoy headed toward the bridge. Along the way they saw the injured and the dead. They passed the weapons control room - there was nothing left of it. The bridge was a tangled mass of twisted metal; sparks still shot out of damaged paneling. Harris was working as fast as he could to disconnect all circuits, trying to prevent a full-blown fire. There was one other man standing. Peter Roget was moving the broken body of Communications Officer Maclean from his position on top of Kirk's motionless figure. He looked up as Spock and McCoy arrived at his side. "The panels exploded," he said tonelessly. "Kirk was in a direct line of the flying metal. Maclean tried to deflect them. Senseless, to have them both die." Roget said nothing of the cuts and burns that covered his own chest and arms.

McCoy knelt by Kirk and felt for a pulse through the blood. For a brief second his eyes closed and he nearly choked on his words. "He's still alive..."

"It would seem the commander did not die for nothing," Spock said quietly.

"Spock," McCoy said, getting to his feet, "the radiation levels are skyrocketing. Let's get everybody back to the *Enterprise*. It's no more dangerous to move them than it is to leave them here, and I'd like to get off this ship before it disintegrates."

Spock nodded in silent agreement and pulled out his communicator.



McCoy moved wearily from one bed to the other. The two men were suffering from severe burns and radiation exposure. There was little he could do for them except to keep them as comfortable as possible. They would die. He grimly left the isolation unit, stripped and scrubbed.

He then checked the living. They didn't look much better, but they would make it. Burns were the worst injuries here. All were sedated and sleeping.

He checked last on Kirk. Spock was sitting silently by the bed. He had been there since the *Enterprise* had started back for Starbase 4. McCoy checked the panel above Kirk's bed. The captain had not regained consciousness, but his vital signs were stronger. McCoy gave him a light sedative. When the captain regained consciousness, he would be in a lot of pain. His left arm was broken and he had bad burns on both arms. McCoy touched the bruised forehead. "You reckless fool," he said softly, "trying to take on a Klingon fleet all by yourself! Will you never learn?" Then, shaking his head, he looked at the Vulcan. "Spock, I know it's no good telling you to rest, so I won't. But I've got to get some sleep..." His voice sobered. "We're going to lose the two with radiation exposure; there's nothing I can do. The others will live..."

Spock could see the exhaustion that McCoy was struggling with. "I know you've done everything possible,

Doctor - no other man could have done more."

Even through his exhaustion, McCoy felt the Vulcan's effort to boost his morale. A smile touched his lips. "Good night, Spock."

"Good night, Doctor."

The hours passed; Spock's silent vigil went on. Then a small sound caught his attention and he saw Peter Roget standing in the doorway. "Can I speak to you a moment, Mr. Spock?"

Spock motioned him to enter. He saw that Roget carried the small recorder he had put unnoticed into Kirk's suitcase. "The captain gave this to me just before we started our attack. He said to make sure you got it...that you would know what it was..." Spock silently took the small machine, his expression completely closed. Roget looked at Kirk. "I've never met anyone like him before..." His voice died away and he looked at Spock. "MacLean gave his life for that man...two months ago he almost allowed Watson to destroy the ship because he didn't give a damn. Yet when he knew the ship was doomed, he risked everything..."

Spock sat silently, watching the young doctor as Roget looked back at Kirk's motionless figure.

"...he didn't ask anything of us. Just by being himself he had us doing things I would have said were impossible. The day he came aboard, he was facing a mutiny - this morning there wasn't a man left who wouldn't have died for him..." The silence stretched out, then he turned to Spock. "Well, I've done as he asked; I better get back to bed..." He lifted his hand as Spock rose to help him. "Thank you, Commander, but I can manage."

Time passed silently as Spock turned the small recorder in his hands. Then he ran the tape back to its beginning.



He could no longer keep falling back into blessed oblivion where pain was nonexistent and the whirling kaleidoscope of his thoughts could be held at arm's length. He gradually surfaced to reality - and pain.

He slowly became aware of a voice, a voice that went quietly on. He couldn't distinguish the words, but the voice was vaguely familiar. His mind drifted, but the pain in his head and body continued to bring fiery consciousness ever closer.

He finally gave up fighting and let reality in. He lay quietly, not fighting the pain, but letting himself drift with it. He gently moved his arms and legs just a fraction. His left arm seemed to be held fast and wouldn't move. He started to move his head, but decided against it. He lay with his eyes closed and concentrated on the voice. It gradually dawned on him that it was his own voice. He opened his eyes slightly and saw Spock sitting with the recorder in his hand, living through Kirk's words the time that the human had spent on the T-17. Kirk closed his eyes again and listened to the words of a lonely, confused, sometimes frightened man facing problems alone - needing help and having none. He heard in his own voice his doubts about himself, about the task he had taken on. He heard himself change, growing more confident, his inner fears starting to resolve themselves, then pushed to the back of his mind as greater pressures made themselves felt. He heard himself time and time again wish for the Vulcan to be with him, to support his decisions, to give his judgments - this alien who had become so much a part of him.

Then there was silence. Kirk opened his eyes to find Spock looking at him. Neither spoke. Spock reached out and placed the recorder on the bedside table. Kirk's eyes followed the movement, then held the soft brown eyes of the Vulcan. "A machine is no replacement for a friend, Spock, but thank you." Spock's response was silent, but eloquent. The minutes passed, the silence comfortable between the Vulcan and the human.

"Would you like me to call Dr. McCoy, Jim?"

"No, I'm all right..." The silence continued for a few minutes longer, then Kirk spoke again. "I really am all right, Spock."

Spock nodded, knowing that Kirk wasn't just talking about his physical condition. "All things heal in time."

Kirk looked at him. "Yes, all things heal..." He looked away. "Some didn't have the time..."

Spock's hand reached out and touched Kirk's arm. "You gave them back something they had lost, Jim. Themselves..."

Kirk gave a little sigh. "Themselves...and myself..."

He closed his eyes and was only dimly aware of Spock removing his hand before sleep overcame all else and took him to a dreamless world.





The Fabric of Space

Bill Theiss grimaced. That might be the wave of the future but it was causing havoc with the fabric of the present. After a great deal of argument, the uniforms of the Starfleet Service came into being, simple lines, easy to care for! Ha! Just see what happens to them when they are cleaned!

The pilot film and what happens? Bill Shatner's shirt ends up in shreds! Stupid idea anyway, super ESP types. It would have been cheaper to zap Shatner with a lightning bolt from special effects. True, he would not have survived to do the series but it would have lessened my problems.

Then - space sadness. Nimoy sobs all over his uniform. That hardly has a chance to dry when De Kelley grabs Bill's shoulder and rips the shirt arm right off! All to give some silly shot that could have been shoved right through the material. What they won't do to make life difficult.

Got that one patched up and ran straight into Miri. Wasn't enough that the crew had to have splotches all over them but once again Bill's shirt was in shreds! Not possible to save it this time, especially after that dumb bunch of kids finished with him. One more for the dustbin.

A rest and relaxation planet, lovely, serene. Uniforms won't even have to go to the cleaners this week. Oh no, Finnigan! No Bill, don't fight! Use a stuntman! Oh my gosh, I don't believe this - my wardrobe bill is tripling!! I can't afford to replace all these clothes! Stupid to have shore leave anyway. Nimoy's right.

You need dress uniforms? But they all have them. Oh, Shatner's being thrown out of the service. Chased his yeoman once too often, huh? OK, OK, I'll be serious. Finney's dead. Oh, Finney's not dead, he is framing Bill. Mental collapse - they fight? Not in my dress uniforms they don't - no way! They either wear standard uniforms or else no fight. What you people won't do for a bit of drama.

"Mr. Theiss - this is a Gorn!" I feel a headache coming on. I know Shatner wins, he is the hero, but is there much of a fight? Oh, he gets chased for about half the film, injured, buried under rocks. Don't suppose his uniform holds up under the strain? He does what to his trousers? Now look - I ordered extra uniform shirts, you didn't say anything about pants! This is turning into a nightmare.

Ah, the second season. My stars have matured. Violence is taboo in their philosophy. My budget is looking good.

"Amok Time". Oh, Spock's getting married. Sounds great. You need a wedding suit? No? He doesn't get married, he fights. With whom? Oh no, you're kidding! The whole front of the shirt? I don't believe it - not the first show of the season!!

Do I have a blue shirt I can rip the back out of? What for? Only Bill's shirts are expendable - get lots of those. Learned my lesson. Leonard gets hit by lightning - is he leaving the show? OK, just joking. I'll see what I can come up with.

Say, I should have tried crying earlier. Half the season has gone by - and no unusual uniforms! Gee! Oh, you need exotic costumes, creatures from all over the galaxy. Sounds good - creative stuff. Whip? What whip? Who gets whipped? He is protecting his crewmen - the shirt couldn't come off first? I haven't been ordering so many extra... All right, I won't argue.

Third season. Show after show just creating costumes, no destruction. Silver costumes? Lal and Thann. Sounds simple. Torture - what for? Who? Oh, he isn't going to wear a shirt, what luck! He does what? Oh, come on! You know I don't have any extra ones for him. The ship's surgeon isn't supposed to get into situations like that! He should be on the ship operating or something!

But now, looking back, some of those costumes were quite something, even if I do say so myself. Almost worth the frustration of all those uniforms.

